

ADDRESSING THE MARGINALIZED STUDENT: THE SECONDARY
PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN ELIMINATING DEFICIT THINKING

BY

JOSEPH ANTHONY SIMONE

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Carolyn Shields, Chair
Professor Liora Bresler
Assistant Professor Christina DeNicolo
Clinical Assistant Professor Linda Sloat

Abstract

As federal mandates purport to improve the academic achievement of all students, the achievement gap between White students and their marginalized peers has not closed. The persistency of the gap raises the notion that the answer to addressing the achievement gap may not lie in policies or practices. The alternative then is to explore the practices of schools and educators, and the impact each has on students. More specifically, the belief system of those who work with students on a regular basis was the focus of this study.

In education, deficit thinking is the practice of holding lower expectations for students with demographics that do not fit the traditional context of the school system. Deficit thinking equates the poor academic achievement of students from low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse communities with factors outside the control of the school. In essence, deficit thinking posits there is little the school can do to “fix” these students so it reverts to providing them with interventions to help them fit the context of the dominant school culture. The literature indicates that trying to “fix” students only further alienates them from the contemporary school setting by perpetuating deficit attitudes and practices toward students who are marginalized.

Through a re-positioning of the self, school leaders help educators recognize the harmful effects of deficit thinking on students who are marginalized. This multiple-case study examined the practices and challenges of two secondary school leaders who work to eliminate deficit thinking practices and replace it with notions of a democratic education. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for school leaders to consider the use of deliberate dialogue to create inclusive schools that validate and create space for students who are marginalized. These are presented in an effort to eliminate the practices associated with deficit thinking.

This thesis is dedicated to school leaders who work deliberately to eliminate deficit thinking for the betterment of every student who walks through our halls and learns in our classrooms. You may never see the fruits of your labor, but know that your commitment to providing an equal and equitable learning environment for every student will positively impact his or her quality of life, and that of every child.

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Chapter I

Introduction to Deficit Thinking

I want to talk about my schedule. I want to know what I did wrong to have to teach those lower level classes. (Secondary Education Teacher)

In high school, I had to have one of my White friends ask the counselor for a college application after I was told three times that they were out of applications. She was able to get it for me that afternoon. (Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership)

Background and Problem

As a school administrator, I am privy to the reality that staff members often hold different expectations for students of varying demographics. The first quote above is a sample conversation I have had with staff members shortly after they viewed their teaching assignments in May for the following school year. In these scenarios, teachers shared with me how disappointed they were that their schedule reflected teaching “lower level” courses because they felt it was a punishment for doing something wrong. “Lower level” is a term used interchangeably for courses considered to be basic or vocational track and geared toward students assumed to be non-college bound or at-risk. Specifically, they are students subjected to a lower track because they have struggled to succeed in the traditional academic setting.

When teachers were asked to share why they felt teaching a lower level class was a punishment, the responses were similar. According to our conversations, the lower level students tend to be viewed in negative contexts. Common perceptions regarding the lower track students included troublesome, unmotivated, uncaring parents, unprepared for rigorous work, difficulty with intellectual discourse, etc. These responses are indicative of deficit thinking. Deficit thinking and the impact of practices associated with it are examined in this study.

The remarks are troubling because they have a significant social impact. First of all, the teachers made deficit assumptions about a group of students before ever meeting them. The teachers were deeply negative about the abilities of students they had yet to meet. Secondly, the majority of the students in the basic track are for the most part students from low income families or from families who do not speak English as a first language—students who are often the most marginalized. Garcia and Guerra (2004) defined marginalized as students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers. Lipman (1998) defined these students as at-risk, or more specifically students and families that are perceived to be uneducated, uncaring, and unable to provide their children with the skills, values, and social support they need to succeed in schools. Freire and Macedo (1995) contended the marginalized, or oppressed, are the minority groups that remain divided from dominant groups along race, class, gender, language, and ethnicity lines.

What is most confounding about the teachers' comments is that the students they refer to are the very students who wither at the bottom of the achievement gap and lack the access to an equitable education. Success in schools largely, although not completely, corresponds to race, class, and gender inequalities in our society (Scheurich & Laible, 1995). Oakes (1995) and Farkas (2003) found an over-representation of minority and low socio-economic students in the traditional lower track of secondary school courses. Cummins (2001) found that children of color had the highest dropout rate, misplacement and overrepresentation in special education, and underrepresentation in gifted and advanced placement programs.

What also makes these remarks troubling is that these particular staff members were the most instructionally prepared educators in the building; they were the first to engage in

conversations about teaching all students effectively, implementing best practices, and signing up for in-house professional development workshops. They also spoke of issues of equity and access, yet they found little irony in their marginalizing perceptions of the lower track students. Their responses were evidence of the pervasiveness of deficit thinking. They claimed that factors outside of their control, such as the home-life, linguistic differences, and socio-economic indicators, limit the potential of these students. Valencia (1997b) found that educators have assumed that the failure of students was naturally attributed to the students' racial or cultural "inferiority," their language, low SES, their parents' low education, and their perceived lack of interest. If the most dedicated teachers suffer from deficit thinking, then it can be assumed that deficit thinking exists within the teaching mindset and pedagogical practices of other staff members. This thought is not particular to any one school. Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2004) found deficit thinking was pervasive in contemporary schools across the world.

It is evident that even the best educators do not see nor understand the impact their beliefs have on the achievement of students—a belief that has marginalized generations of students in the United States. Teachers who operate through a lens of deficit thinking are conditionally practicing an approach that "blames the victim" (Valencia, 1997a). Whether their approach is intentional or not, educators inadvertently lay the blame for the lack of academic success and perceived academic failure on factors that relate to the child's home life, including the socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic background of the student. In essence, the teachers described above are pathologizing the differences between their social context and that of students who are marginalized (Shields et al., 2004).

Shields et al. (2004) defined pathologizing as a process of treating differences as deficits that located the responsibility for school success in the lived experiences of children rather than

situating responsibility in the education system itself. Freire (1998) referred to such notions as the “culture of silence”:

The twofold pattern is apparent. Externally, the alienated society as a whole, as the mere object of the director society, is not heard by the latter. On the contrary, the metropolis prescribes its word, thereby effectively silencing it. Meanwhile, within the alienated society itself, the masses are subjected to the same kind of silence by the power elites. (p. 478)

Pathologizing in the form of deficit thinking is a major impediment to the academic success of students who are marginalized. Therefore, dialogue regarding their lived experiences may be the answer to the silence.

The notion of deficit thinking in the United States dates back as far as early exploration and early forms of racism. Racialized beliefs considered people of color and minority individuals to be biologically or culturally inferior (Menchaca, 1997). These beliefs were rooted in the colonial economic interests as it involved slavery (Blauner, 1994; Menchaca, 1997; Takaki, 1994). Stocking (1968) found that the desire of the British Empire to turn every piece of vacant land into profitable property in America, Africa, and the West Indies resulted in the rationalization of racist actions leading to the enslavement of non-Whites, especially in an effort to replace the decimated Native American population. Menchaca (1997) presented the notion that early southern European immigrants faced similar racist actions as they were deemed intellectually inferior to their settled, English speaking, northern European peers in an effort to keep them in the underclass and limit their possibility of attaining political and economic power. These examples set in motion an accepted assumption that non-northern European Whites were deemed inferior and therefore unworthy of the same rights and opportunities of their White counterparts (Valencia, 1997a).

Deficit thinking is a double-edged sword that leaves many practitioners and legislators in a quandary. Weiner (2006) posited that school bureaucracies often attempted to “fix” students that were performing poorly, placing the blame on the student and their family, rather than the social ecology of the school and classroom, thus preventing any real institutional change. In contrast, legislators addressed teacher characteristics and deficits as the only factor that counts in undermining student learning. It implies an uncomplicated solution: Fix the teachers we have or hire new and better individuals. Cummins (2001) contended that teachers do have power and influence in the current context to impact deficit thinking, but they are often negated by structural practices:

Individual educators are never powerless, although they frequently work in conditions that are oppressive for both them and their students. While they operate under many constraints with respect to curriculum and working conditions, educators do have choices in the way they structure classroom interactions and in the messages about identity they communicate to their students. Educators are capable of determining for themselves the social and educational goals they want to achieve with their students because they are responsible for the role definitions they adopt in relation to culturally diverse students and communities. Even in the context of English-only instruction, educators have options in the orientation they adapt to students’ languages and cultures, in the forms of parent and community participation they encourage, and in the ways they implement pedagogy and assessment. (p. 653)

Continued notions of blaming those affected by deficit thinking perpetuate the low achievement and poor academic opportunities of students who are marginalized. Schools need to move beyond the notion of blaming.

Barber (1992) found that public education was not about serving the public; it was about creating the public. Schools have to transcend life by providing all students with equal and equitable opportunities in creating this public. Houston (2003) found that schools may go as far as providing equal opportunities, but the reality was that the access to such opportunities was

quite inequitable. As long as all students continue to face inequities in school due to deficit thinking practices, educators have to recognize that an equitable education is not being provided.

It becomes the responsibility of the school leader to address and eliminate the roots of deficit thinking by providing strategies to help teachers move beyond notions of marginalization and toward an equitable education. Schools cannot afford to blame the failure and poor achievement of students on their social, cultural, and economic factors. School leaders need to take responsibility by addressing the issues of power and dominance that impact a student's ability to acquire knowledge and skills (Foucault, 1980). Until then, school practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm will continue to hide student and teacher abilities (Weiner, 2006). When a democratic education is achieved, it allows for all stakeholders (students, parents, and staff) to come to understand the self, both past and present, and be prepared to assume responsibility for the future (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001). Deficit thinking cannot be fixed; it must be addressed, eliminated and replaced with an equitable education that equally and effectively prepares every student for his or her future.

Problem Statement

Numerous studies have demonstrated that a deficit thinking paradigm is highly pervasive in both public schools and institutions of higher education (Valencia, 1997a). Ladson-Billings (2007) found the evidence was clear that various segments of the public school population experienced negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis. When compared to their White middle-class counterparts, students of color, students of low socioeconomic status, students who speak languages other than English, and students with disabilities consistently experienced

significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander et al., 2001; Delpit, 1995).

Although the problem of deficit thinking is evident throughout American classrooms, there is little research examining the challenges faced by principals who address deficit thinking (Shields et al., 2004; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Specifically, there is little research on how a principal addresses deficit thinking at the secondary school level. The literature on school leadership and effective schools has long held that the leadership of the principal is the single most important factor in eliminating deficit thinking (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). It follows, then, that the leadership of the secondary school principal has tremendous potential to eliminate deficit thinking and provide students who are marginalized with an equitable education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multi-case study was to understand how principals aim to eliminate deficit thinking in a secondary school setting. Specifically, it builds an understanding of the practices that secondary school principals employ to challenge and change the beliefs and attitudes of teachers who succumb to deficit thinking. This is critical because teacher attitudes and relationships are more important and directly related to student achievement than funding or facilities (Shields et al., 2004). It is much safer to focus on the presumed deficits than to highlight the inequities in the distribution of economic and educational resources as causal factors in students' underachievement (Cummins, 2001).

When teachers overcame deficit thinking, student achievement increased (Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2002). Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the principal to provide a catalyst for social change. The single most important factor in the academic

achievement of minority students is the explicit rejection of deficit thinking by the school-based administrator (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Therefore, this study seeks to understand the role of two secondary school principals who explicitly reject deficit thinking to provide a more equitable education to students who are marginalized by deficit thinking practices.

Research Questions

The primary research question asked how principals eliminate deficit thinking in secondary school settings. To accomplish this purpose, the following five sub-questions guided this study:

1. How do secondary school principals define deficit thinking?
2. How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies do secondary school principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?
4. What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?
5. What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?

Rationale

To promote equality, democratic leadership must create a climate that allows debate, discourse, and deliberation of ideas and issues. Leadership cannot do this by focusing completely on the narrow goal of training children to be good employees who can read and do math (Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001) nor can it be accomplished by leading a school environment that focuses on standardized assessments. In this context, teachers are deskilled and the curriculum becomes a drill-and-kill model of reading and mathematics instruction, essentially marginalizing disadvantaged students (Ravitch, 2010a). Compelling evidence suggested that

effective leadership by principals and superintendents could improve both teaching and learning (Hoachlander et al., 2001; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) and superintendents could use external accountability as a lever to move the internal system to support improved teaching and learning (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Yet, improved test scores did not automatically promote social or economic equity or equality (Garza & Garza, 2010). In order to impact and promote equity and equality in schools by eliminating deficit thinking, it is going to take more than leadership; it is going to take leadership with the purpose of transforming the beliefs of those who practice from a deficit thinking platform (Cummins, 2001).

The type of leadership needed to create this paradigm shift is that of a transformative leader. A transformative leader is rooted in moral and ethical values in a social context. Their approach enhances equity, social change and quality of life for students who are marginalized (Astin & Astin, 2000; Shields, 2010). Transformative leaders find ways to overcome the persistent and socially constructed disparities that exist between dominant and marginalized populations. Transformative leaders challenged deficit thinking as well as attitudes, policies, and practices that pathologized the lived experiences of children (Shields et al., 2004).

Students who are marginalized are sometimes labeled as lower achieving and subsequently relegated to lower level classes in a misguided effort to best serve their needs. In actuality, these types of practices actually hamper the intellectual, social, emotional and cultural growth of some students. This practice must be addressed by school leaders because it perpetuates the notion of blaming the families, cultures, and linguistic differences of students. Change requires leadership that is focused on more than test scores. It requires leadership focused on eliminating deficit thinking.

Furthermore, research supported the need for professional development as a vital component of increasing student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), and the impact of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008); however, there is also the notion of how radically disconnected leadership research is from the core business of teaching (Robinson et al., 2008). As long as principals are burdened with the bureaucracy of standardized tests in a failed attempt to close achievement gaps, they are unable to fully dedicate themselves to the professional development and instructional leadership needed to eliminate deficit thinking.

Review of Literature

The literature review in chapter II defines deficit thinking and builds an understanding of the concepts and strategies that eliminate deficit thinking. Specifically, the literature examines the history of deficit thinking, the challenges associated with overcoming deficit thinking, and the practices that assist in eliminating deficit thinking.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking is the notion that the failure of students lies in factors outside the control of the schools. It is a pervasive problem that transcends nearly every facet of education (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Oakes (1995) referred to deficit thinking as assumptions that low-income children, children of color, and their families are limited by cultural, situational, and individual deficits that schools cannot alter. As a result, these children received fewer educational and social advantages.

Weiner (2006) found that educators may become discouraged when they come face-to-face with hitherto unquestioned practices and conditions because they know that they cannot

eliminate these practices on their own; what we can all do, however, is acknowledge deficit explanations and examine them critically. The most notable impact of deficit thinking is the achievement gap.

Much research exists that examined the achievement gap between students of White backgrounds and that of their minority peers. The achievement gap created a tracking system that has a disproportionately larger number of marginalized students in a “lower” or “basic” academic track (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). The disadvantages of tracking were most detrimental to minority students (Farkas, 2003; Oakes, 1995) because of the imbalance of minority students in the lowest academic track (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Furthermore, Cummins (2001) argued that language-minority students failed primarily as a result of a home/school language switch.

The literature stressed the importance of taking action to eliminate deficit thinking and replacing it with a democratic education that provided all students with the opportunity to succeed in the education world (Pearl, 1997; Pearl & Knight, 2010).

Transformative Leadership Challenges Deficit Thinking

Transformative leadership is leading for social justice (Shields, 2010). As a school leader, the principal is critical in creating a vision of the school that focuses on changing the culture to improve student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). Furthermore, principals advocate and establish a school wide vision of (a) eliminating discrimination, inequity, and exclusion, and (b) fostering the success of all students, in part by explicitly recognizing and affirming students who are marginalized (Capper, 1993; Riehl, 2000). In order to improve the academic success of students, the principal has to play a critical role in creating an environment that challenges deficit thinking.

Research indicates that it takes more than an effective leader to change a culture. It takes a transformative leader to change the core beliefs and social context of teachers. The section examined how transformative leadership is loosely described as leadership that creates a transformative and ethical organization with a focus on three pillars: critique, justice, and caring (Starratt, 1991). Shields (2010) described it in the following passage:

Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. Thus, it is my contention that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related. (p. 559)

In an attempt to promote social justice, principals facilitated difficult and sensitive conversations that encouraged teachers to develop greater responsibility for (a) understanding the pervasiveness of institutionalized oppressive beliefs and practices (especially institutionalized racism), and (b) subsequently better serving traditionally marginalized students (Kose, 2009). Additionally, Kose and Shields (2009) stipulated that such leaders examine the structures, norms, or curricular materials that subtly reinforce marginalization of particular groups (e.g., ability tracking or pull-out programs).

Leadership Practices in Addressing Deficit Thinking

Brown (2006) found leaders for social justice examined power relations within schools and society, scrutinized differential schooling, and critiqued social class stratifications. Professional development was vital to improving the learning and achievement of students (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). It is through specific leadership strategies like professional development that a school leader can begin to change a school culture to replace deficit thinking with a democratic education.

To improve the academic outlook for students who are marginalized, professional development is critical. In order to promote equality, professional development grounded in democratic leadership must create a climate that allows debate, discourse, and deliberation of ideas and issues. Leadership cannot do this by focusing completely on the narrow goal of training children to be good employees who can read and do math (Hoachlander et al., 2001). Hence, the need for educational leaders is to ensure that these freedoms are not taken for granted but are cultivated and critiqued in class and staff rooms through professional development. It underscores the need for professional development that enhances teachers' abilities to work with diverse students who differ by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, ability, or socioeconomic status (Shields et al., 2009).

Additionally, dialogue is a critical tool that school leaders can use in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking. Dialogue then is more than a process of communication; it is a democratic action that validates the experiences of those who are marginalized because their realities have been pathologized. Buber (1939) also suggested the importance of knowing one's students and community, and of educating people through relationships for community which is achieved by fostering dialogic relationships. Furthermore, "We are truly human only when we are in a dialogical relation with others" (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 12). Dialogue is a vital tool that fosters relationships between students who are marginalized and those of the dominant discourse. It is critical in the creation of a culture that works to eliminate deficit thinking.

Methodology

For this research, a qualitative multi-case study was used. The case study consisted of interviews, anonymous teacher surveys, and observations of two principals from secondary

school settings in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (2000) case study structure of addressing the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned. The case studies allowed me to examine and codify the strategies in which principals engage deficit thinking, the challenges/issues they face in addressing deficit thinking, and the impact of their approach.

Framework

The literature suggests that deficit thinking is best understood not as a contemporary practice, but as a thought process that has been perpetuated since the inception of the American schooling system (Valencia, 1997b). Pearl (1997) posited that a democratic education is a process that replaces deficit thought and leads to more equity and equality in the education system. Therefore, this study examined how secondary school principals promote a democratic education by using Shields et al. (2004) framework for eliminating deficit thinking. The strategies each principal employs under the umbrella of agency, community, social justice, deep democracy, and academic excellence were examined as they help teachers reposition themselves in relation to students who are marginalized. The study was conducted through a series of principal interviews, observations and surveys of staff members.

Participants

Using a purposeful sampling technique via input from school superintendents, faculty advisors and education consultants, principal candidates that engaged in strategies pertaining to the elimination of deficit thinking were identified. A screening interview was employed to identify secondary school principals who met specific criteria. I looked for principals that both understood the term deficit thinking and specifically employed strategies that address deficit

thinking. I narrowed my scope to two secondary principals from school settings in a large Midwestern metropolitan area.

After the initial interviews with each principal, I collected additional data through an anonymous teacher survey at each school and two observations of the principal. An additional interview with each principal was conducted to help build the data collection and employ a member-checking step. The approach assisted in triangulating the findings.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study was the selection process of principals. Although much effort went into selecting school leaders that met the criteria established in the methodology section, the possibility existed that the selected participants purported a leadership style in accordance with a democratic education but in actuality acted in accordance with deficit thinking. This notion aligns with the premise that a principal who considers himself or herself to be transformative is thereby an advocate of leadership for democracy.

A delimitation of the study is the notion that a principal must be a transformative leader in order to eliminate deficit thinking. A transformation of beliefs is going to come through leadership deeply rooted in democracy and social equity with a focus on critique, justice, and caring (Starratt, 1991). This is the definition of transformative leadership sought in the participants of this study.

Statement of Significance

School leaders face multiple obstacles that prevent them from leading to eliminate deficit thinking. The most prominent inhibitor is NCLB. Instead of focusing on a curriculum that

prepares students to become civically engaged in the world, to become contributing members of society, and to learn of and empathize with the values and cultures of other groups, school leaders must devote much time and energy to the preparation of students for a single standardized test that focuses explicitly on math and reading. The emphasis of standardized testing undermines moral accountability for deep and equitable change; that is the premise of eliminating deficit thinking (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

Furthermore, undiagnosed practices that promote deficit thinking will continue to hinder the educational potential of students who are marginalized until the discriminatory thoughts and practices associated with it are addressed and eliminated. If researchers would invest effort in gaining the trust and acceptance of school district administrators, they might work with such administrators to both use existing district data and to collect complementary data to test for, and seek to eliminate, whatever school-based discrimination may exist (Mickelson, 2001). The finding of this study can help school leaders unveil excluding practices and eliminate them to allow the emergence of a more equitable education.

This study sought to fill a gap in the literature regarding the challenges faced by principals who address deficit thinking. There is a lack of evidence that examines how a principal describes the impact of eliminating deficit thinking on the intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural life of students (Shields et al., 2004; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Additionally, the study suggested that much of the policy regarding school accountability is made in a vacuum without the input of democratic school leaders who need time to cultivate deep democratic ideals. Unfortunately, the demands for accountability do not allow school leaders to do so (Ravitch, 2010b).

Chapter II

The Review of Literature

In the education world, deficit thinking results in educational practices that deter some students from receiving an equal and equitable education. They are often excluded from educational opportunities that their privileged peers are afforded. As a result, students who are marginalized continue to suffer from micro-aggressions resulting in the notion of a “thousand tiny cuts” (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Lewis and Macedo (1996) wrote of the “privilege of domination” referring to the exclusion of certain groups from the dominant context because of who they are.

Deficit thinking posits that students who fail in school do so because of internal deficits including limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation, immoral behavior, and cultural differences (Valencia, 1997a) resulting in an educational crisis. Cummins (2001) found this “crisis” is an ongoing one: underachievement is concentrated among students who grow up in impoverished conditions and among groups such as African American, Latino/Latina, and Native American students. Freire (1998) contended that marginalization is not a choice; marginalized people and groups have been expelled from and kept outside the social system and are therefore the objective of violence. In this literature review, I use Garcia and Guerra (2004) definition of marginalized as students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers. It is these cultural, linguistic and socio-economic differences that lead to the marginalization of students as a result of deficit thinking.

Deficit thinking is premised on the assumption that cognitive and motivational deficits exist in students who are marginalized. Little is done to question the deficiencies of the

contemporary educational structure that perpetuates these beliefs. Efforts to address the limiting beliefs are hindered by school districts' and educators' tendencies to place the problem within the student and family or by policymakers' tendencies to place the problem within the school. Neither approach examined the links between school practices and student outcomes (Berman, Chambliss, & Geiser, 1999; Cummins, 2001). Interventions to curb such deficiencies and shortcomings in students were created, but these seemingly proactive measures did more to harm the opportunities of marginalized students than promote their academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Deficit thinking practices created an education that lacked equity and equal access to marginalized groups of students (Farkas, 2003; Ferguson, 1998; Oakes, 1995). Deficit thinking resulted in a disparity of resources and opportunities for students who are marginalized. A democratic education framed how deficit thinking practices were eliminated (Pearl, 1997; Shields et al., 2004). Applying specific democratic practices in the education setting enhanced the likelihood of increasing equity and access to students who are marginalized. An education that was based in democracy eradicated the practices of deficit thinking (Pearl, 1997; Pearl & Knight, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2008). There are specific best practices that principals immediately employed in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking (García & Guerra, 2004). These practices can be employed to start replacing deficit thinking practices with practices that promote an equitable education.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework is based on Valencia's (1997a) examination of deficit thinking in education, and Shields et al. (2004) notion of repositioning the self to promote a democratic

education that eliminates deficit thinking practices. Together, these built the case for examining the negative impact of deficit thinking in secondary education settings and construct an understanding that replaces deficit thinking with an equitable education.

Based on Valencia's work, I examined the historical implications of deficit thinking and the impact of deficit thinking on contemporary education practices. The literature also examined empirical evidence to show how deficit thinking practices negatively impact the contemporary school setting for students who are marginalized. Utilizing Pearl's (1997) notion that a democratic education is the answer to deficit thinking, the literature worked through the lens of Shields et al. (2004) notion of repositioning the self to create a culture of democracy that fosters an equitable education. More specifically, the literature examined how one can reposition the self to create contexts for learning constructed within discourses that reject deficit thinking.

I then proposed a conceptual framework to examine how principals addressed deficit thinking practices and replaced them with notions of an equitable education. These findings inform the current leadership practices of secondary school principals in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking to provide educational equity and equality to all students.

Valencia (1997a) traced the evolution of deficit thinking through an historical lens and examines how it has positioned itself in contemporary education settings. I utilized his findings to build a framework for examining the role of human behavior and dominant contexts in the current education system that continues to marginalize students with cultural, socio-economical, and linguistic backgrounds that differ from that of the dominant group. Valencia explored six examples of deficit thinking that continue to perpetuate the academic failure of students with different cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds. Dating back to the 1600s, his

examples continue to negatively impact students in the 21st century. These include blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy.

Each example of deficit thinking has roots that are often based on misleading or ill-informed research. Because of this misconstrued foundation, deficit thinking is often perpetuated by policies and practices aimed at decreasing or bridging deficiencies between privileged and marginalized students. In reality, such policies and practices do nothing more than hinder the existence of an equal and equitable education. Recognizing the impact of deficit thinking in the education world and building an understanding of how it negatively impacts student learning is the first step in eliminating the practices of deficit thinking.

Replacing the term deficiency with differences and fostering a democratic education are integral to the elimination of deficit thinking. Pearl (1997) posited that a democratic education is an alternative to deficit thinking. He examined how current policies and practices in education have manifested themselves throughout the history of education in the United States. They have manifested specifically because of conservative, liberal and radical thought. Conservatives maintain status quo, pointing to the victim, as Valencia purports, as the cause of the achievement gap. Conservatives contend that “changing the victim” will improve the education of students who are marginalized. Liberals and radicals contend that the structure of education must be changed in order to improve the academic integrity of marginalized groups. Unfortunately, these approaches often act to change the structure without recognizing the lived experiences of students who are marginalized and their families. Meaningful change in education posits two essentials: First, those in the dominant discourse need to reject deficit thinking. Second, the voices of the marginalized must be heard in order to create a shared understanding that promotes

a deep democracy (Cummins, 2001; J. M. Green, 1999) and pave the path to a democratic education (Garza & Garza, 2010; Pearl, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 2008).

Shields et al. (2004) explored a democratic education in practice. They found that when stakeholders in the dominant discourse reject deficit thinking by repositioning themselves to allow the stakeholders of marginalized groups to be equal players in educational reform, then a democratic learning experience ensued. Their research contended that a democratic education is built on reframing the notions of agency, community, social justice, deep democracy, and academic excellence and each of these terms is explored in the next section. A democratic education deconstructs the system of education and rebuilds it with a shared understanding between all stakeholder groups. A major reason previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is that the power relationships between teachers and students and between schools and communities have remained essentially unchanged (Cummins, 2001).

By repositioning the self, Shields et al. (2004) found that educational reform is possible in the form of a democratic education. They provided a platform for educational leaders to eliminate deficit thinking by creating a democratic education. Empirical evidence posited there are specific and effective practices principals can employ to start the process of eliminating deficit thinking to foster a democratic education (García & Guerra, 2004).

Historical Implications and Contemporary Impact

This section presents literature on the emergence of deficit thinking and follows its impact on contemporary education. It is important to understand the evolution of deficit thinking to better frame and understand the context of contemporary deficit thinking practices. One cannot be considered without understanding its relationship or impact upon the other.

Early deficit thinking in education dates back to the colonial period. Early beliefs about people of color considered minority individuals to be biologically or culturally inferior (Menchaca, 1997), and these beliefs were rooted in the colonial economic interests as they involved slavery (Blauner, 1994; Menchaca, 1997; Takaki, 1994). The desire to acquire land led to fraudulent practices and the adoption of the religious viewpoint that Native Americans were demonized and their conversion or extermination was justifiable (Menchaca, 1997; Weinberg, 1977). These examples set in motion an accepted assumption that non-Whites were deemed inferior and therefore unworthy of the same rights and opportunities of their White counterparts (Valencia, 1997a). These accepted practices transcended political and economic thought, reaching into the realm of education where they could be manufactured on a societal scale.

Deficit thinking practices transcended homogenous communities in the United States. Also impacted by deficit thinking in the early part of the 1900s were individuals from southern Europe who were deemed inferior to the dominant northern European group. With the immigration growth of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Social Darwinists of northern European heritage were threatened by the influx of southern European immigrants. Specifically, northern European Social Darwinists proposed action to preserve their superiority. Since the lack of English limited the economic opportunities for many of the southern European immigrants, they were denied educational access to learn the dominant language. As a consequence, many Whites found the new world was plagued with conditions of poverty. Social Darwinists took advantage of the plight of these poor, White southern European immigrants to promote their own agenda to keep the balance of knowledge-power (Foucault, 1980). As a result, schooling for immigrants consisted of teaching students to become skilled factory workers without any exposure to the

dominant discourse and therefore could not challenge the economic and political powers of the dominant discourse.

Blaming the Victim

One aspect of deficit thinking includes the notion of blaming the victim. Blaming the victim is a belief that the poor academic achievement of a student is due to factors associated with the student's low socio-economic status, his or her minority status, or his or her limited-English proficiency (Valencia, 1997a). García and Guerra (2004) found blaming the victim directly and negatively impacted the academic success of minority students. Educators often believe that the students and the families are at fault because "these children" enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills their uncaring parents neither valued nor supported (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 1997a).

West, Denton, and Reaney (2001) found kindergarten teachers also blame parents of students who are marginalized for not adequately preparing students for the social and emotional challenges of kindergarten. Results from their findings indicated that teachers perceive White students to be more academically, socially, and emotionally prepared than minority students in their ability to complete an activity, pay attention, and cooperate with their peers at the beginning of the school year. If this is the perception of students as they enter kindergarten, then these students face undue challenges before they even begin a formal education.

Responses to the notion of blaming the victim include compensatory education measures that try to fix the deficiencies rather than address the social ills, and the formula for action becomes extraordinarily simple: change the victim (Ryan, 1971). In education, such measures have resulted in practices that try to change the skills and attitudes of some students to reflect those of their White middle-class peers. It fails to recognize that these deficiencies are merely

differences that carry their own strengths and benefits. Instead of challenging the embedded school structure that was built on deficit thinking, school practices too often try to change the student to fit the mold of the traditional White, middle-class student (Cummins, 2001).

Oppression

Another aspect of deficit thinking is the notion of oppression. The notion of oppression paved a path for educational policies and practices that promote the status quo of minority student achievement. Valencia (1997b) contended “these policies and practices are founded on outdated and unsubstantiated studies that are fueled by class and racial prejudice” (p. 4). Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1995) referred to oppression as the social, economic, and cultural conditions that lead to savage inequalities resulting in the loss of dignity, denial of human citizenship, and outright violent and criminal acts committed by the institutions responsible for implementing the law or practices.

In education, the notion of oppression traces back to slavery when laws in the south made it illegal for anyone to educate a slave. It was perpetuated by the belief that African slaves were incapable of higher learning, but it was because of the fear of what an educated slave might be able to do that perpetuated these compulsory ignorance laws. Weinberg (1977) found that “Whites seemed to fear not that Negroes could learn, but that they would” (p. 39). This fear resulted in practices that continue to limit the educational opportunities of some students.

Educational decisions that were based on oppression survive in the contemporary public school sector. School segregation was founded on the belief that minority students were intellectually and biologically inferior. Dominant group think feared that race mixing in a public school setting would only contaminate and hold back the progress of White students (Menchaca, 1997). Contemporary thought finds educators’ negative beliefs about students who are

marginalized have lowered their expectations for student performance as well as their response to students' underachievement (García & Guerra, 2004).

A more modern form is high-stakes testing. According to Valencia (1997a), high-stakes testing is an exclusive use of a test score to make a significant educational decision often coupled with undesirable consequences. As a determining factor for identifying and subsequently closing lower-achieving schools, high-stakes testing is closing the doors of opportunity on students from predominately minority schools in low-income areas. These students need the extra help more than anyone else, yet high-stakes testing fails to address the obstacles, inequities and adverse conditions. It further punishes some students for their linguistic and cultural differences rather than address the structures that allow the differences to become deficiencies.

Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998) found neither traditional socioeconomic differences nor school attendance differences explained why some children perform lower in academic settings than White children with similar skills based on prior scores. Their studies found that even when prior performance, socio-economic status, and academic access were equalized, minority students still performed considerably lower in reading, math, and vocabulary. They suggested the problem lies with teachers and administrators who overtly or subtly allow prejudices and assumptions to infiltrate their interactions and expectations with marginalized students, thereby limiting the opportunities of minority and low-income students.

Teacher perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably perpetuated and even contributed to the achievement gap of marginalized students (Ferguson, 1998). Although the deficit actions may seem subtle, the effects can be substantial as they accumulated from kindergarten through high school (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Pseudoscience

Pseudoscience has been used for decades to perpetuate deficit thinking. Pseudoscience is an aspect of deficit thinking that is defined as the process of false persuasion by scientific pretense (Blum, 1978). The bias one brings to a hypotheses and the unrelenting pursuit of data collection and objective empirical verification often results in violations of scientific method when the bias stems from deficit thinking. Unfortunately, the misguided research often becomes the basis for educational policies and practices that resulted in compensatory education initiatives such as tracking, standardized testing, and early intervention programs (Ravitch, 2009; Ryan, 1971).

Standardized testing and tracking are two initiatives that negatively impacted the academic potential of students who are marginalized. High-stakes standardized testing promoted and encouraged the deficit-thinking practice of “teaching the basics.” Unfortunately, minority children most often continue to be trapped in this perpetuated cycle of exclusion. This created another gap referred to as the “invisible” gap. The “invisible gap” refers to the exclusive knowledge and experiences that disenfranchised children need to help them develop the resiliency they must have to navigate a system that is not designed for them (Garza & Garza, 2010).

Farkas (2003) argued that ethnic minority and low-income students are unfairly and disproportionately placed in lower ability groups and special education, and they are disproportionately held back a grade thereby limiting their opportunities for learning. Since many of the deficiencies on standardized testing are associated with linguistic differences, the actions taken by schools to address these deficiencies act against promoting an equitable education for marginalized students (Valencia, 1997a).

Furthermore, many of these students were deemed “at-risk” and were provided with early intervention programs. The label itself resonates with a deficit premise. “At-risk” indicates that a learning or behavior problem exists that the school cannot control (parental, socio-economical, linguistic, or cultural) and therefore the school must fix in order to help the student succeed (Lipman, 1998). The interventions provided for at-risk students often include counseling, watered-down curriculum, rote learning, and an emphasis on controlling behavior.

As long as researchers approach educational research with negative biases, pursue such work in methodologically flawed ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing manners, deficit thinking measures will continue to promote false fixes that purport to provide an equitable education for all students. In the contemporary context, pseudoscience has created environments where teachers believe that students who are marginalized are shy, unwilling to speak in class, unable to make eye contact, proficient only in concrete activities, and ill-prepared for abstract thought due to their cultural and family values. With this prevailing thought, there is little chance that students with cultural, socio-economical and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the dominant group will be exposed to an equal and equitable education (Shields et al., 2004). Students who are marginalized are overexposed to rudimentary curriculum in a controlling environment which lacks exposure to culturally nurturing material that peaks their curiosity.

Temporal Changes

Similar to pseudoscience, temporal change is an aspect of deficit thinking that seeks ways to fix students with cultural, socio-economical, and linguistic backgrounds that differ from that of the dominant group. Temporal changes also allow educators to succumb to the culture of poverty theory with the assertion that home and environmental contexts perpetuate academic

deficiencies. Contemporary temporal attitudes are bound by false assumptions that low-grade genes, inferior culture and class, and inadequate familial socialization skills impact the lack of achievement for marginalized students (Valencia, 1997a).

Instead of using research to help eliminate deficit thinking practices, temporal change inadvertently translates it into attitudes and beliefs about students that perpetuate stereotypical and racist beliefs. Early American Zeitgeist purported that anyone that did not speak English or hold values and norms similar to northern Europeans was considered inferior and unable to perform at similar academic levels. Today, explanations for the lack of school success of students in general carry cultural meanings linked to beliefs about race, class, opportunity and success in the United States and the role of schools and teachers (Lipman, 1998). As a consequence, students with cultural, socio-economical and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the dominant group are deemed deficient and in need of remediation (García & Guerra, 2004).

Educability

As a result of deficit thinking practices, the perceived abilities of students who are marginalized impact their academic opportunities. Educability is an aspect of deficit thinking that posits students of certain “culturally deprived” groups were unable to function at a level equal to their peers (Bereiter & Engelman, 1966). What is most concerning is that this belief resonates not only with those in the dominant group, but it transcended those in the marginalized group in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many who live in low-income communities of color don’t believe that the system will deliver on its promise. Some believe that poor children of color, for any or all of a multitude of reasons, are uneducable to the high standards that college admission requires (Oakes, 1995).

Such notions of educability afforded academic experts in the early and mid-1900s to provide separate educational environments in the best interest of students who are marginalized. If school buildings were not already segregated, the course structure was segregated so that the limited-English proficient and culturally different students were grouped together for “rote, unchallenging verbal stimulation in which the child had to adjust to the curriculum—not the other way around (Bereiter & Engelman, 1966). Additionally, Terman (1916) found that experts recommended that these students be “segregated in special classes and given instruction which is concrete and practical (p. 91). The intellectually inferior would best be served by concrete, low-level segregated instruction (Menchaca, 1997).

Rooted in the premise of blaming the victim, educability theory provided ill-conceived cures for the marginalized by providing avenues to success. Garcia & Guerra (2004) found that systems deliberately and systematically problematized the tendency to label students at-risk based on their demographic characteristics. Farkas (2003) found that no matter the school, ethnic minority and low-income children were typically overrepresented in lower curriculum tracks and ability groups. At the end of the year, the lower performers who were perpetually grouped together were taught a less demanding curriculum and ended the year at lower achievement levels than their peers in the other academic tracks. Unfortunately, success for the marginalized in this context resulted in lower rigor and lower expectations that provided little opportunity for students to succeed in the dominant discourse. In contemporary classrooms, Oakes (1995) found lower-track courses resulted in disadvantages to minority students, yet some students continued to be marginalized in the less demanding, less rigorous lower track classes. The empirical evidence indicated that lower track classes were overwhelmingly students from low-income and

culturally/linguistically diverse communities; deficit thinking practices created a structure that does not provide equity and access for all students.

Heterodoxy

Heterodoxy is rooted in the premise that capital and symbolic powers are frameworks of class domination. They are beliefs that fester within the dominant mode of thought and practice in the context of the given period. Foucault (1980) referred to the notion of power-knowledge in understanding how marginalized groups continue to lose in the academic battle because of their lack of knowledge about the dominant education discourse. Under the guise of heterodoxy, those with the power have little incentive to rescind those privileges. Giving up or questioning the dominant mode of thought means to risk certain privileges one is granted because of an association with the dominant group. There is a deep antipathy to acknowledging that schools tend to reflect the power structure of the society and that these power relations are directly relevant to educational outcomes (Cummins, 2001).

In education, the outcome of a heterodoxy perspective is to accept current policies and practices that perpetuate achievement gaps. More specifically, the very progressive reform measures aimed to curb and correct the behavior and learning patterns of some students continue to exist. What ensues are narrow-minded, goodwill measures that do nothing to fix the real societal ills but try to fix those students that do not fit the mold of the dominant educational structure. Weiner (2006) purported that this bureaucratic culture fostered the pervasive assumption that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be “fixed” because the problem exists in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom.

Under the umbrella of heterodoxy is the genetic pathology model (Valencia, 1997). This model contended that the inferiority of non-Whites is transmitted by the genetic code. The premise of this model is the belief that despite the rigor of education, certain races are incapable of achieving a level of academic achievement equivalent to their White peers. This belief received substantial support in the early 1900s as notable scholars and educational leaders bought into the deficit thinking mentality. What ensued were throngs of educators and psychologists who adopted the notion that certain minority and low socio-economic students could only be expected to achieve at a certain level, a level considerably lower than that of their White peers.

Even when segregation was outlawed, the practice of segregating continued. Oakes (1995) found many administrators and parents were quick to create and accept separate academic tracks that ensured marginalized students would not be enrolled in the same classes as their peers. The educational repercussions have resulted in a tracking system with lower expectations for some students that ultimately accepts inequality and social class division. The practice segregates White, English speaking, upper and middle-income students from their linguistically and culturally different, lower-income peers.

Heterodoxy created a perpetuating cycle of deficit thinking based on generational marginalization of disadvantaged students. It became a self-perpetuating practice, especially at the intervention level, as compensatory programs and remedial approaches reinforced the marginalization of students.

Contemporary Impact of Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking negatively impacts the education of all students. It fosters the acceptance of an inequitable education system that limits the growth and potential of every student. Shields

et al. (2004) found that pathologizing in the form of deficit theorizing is the major impediment to the achievement of minoritized students. One result of deficit thinking is a message of incompetence given to students that result in the de-skilling of these students.

For many students whose cultural and linguistic background differs from that of their White peers, and for students of families of low socio-economic backgrounds, deficit thinking creates obstacles to obtaining a rigorous and equitable education. This notion is often intended to “fix” the student by eliminating differences for the betterment of each minoritized student, but the reality is that it creates a dissonance between the mainstream cultures and those of marginalized populations. The erroneous assumption is that the mainstream cultures, institutions, policies and practices are the correct ones, and that the indigenous children must be helped to adapt, enabled to “catch up,” in order to succeed on another culture’s terms (Shields, et al., 2004, p. 225).

Attempts to correct a student’s cultural and linguistic differences along with the subliminal message of incompetence sent by an educator limit the students’ potential in the early grades, and it further debilitates his or her academic growth as he or she enters each successive grade with a less rigorous academic experience and lowered expectations (Garza & Garza, 2010). May (2000) found that attempting to enforce ethnic, linguistic, and/or religious homogeneity is far more likely to foster disunity than to ameliorate it” (p. 5). Consequently, attempts to correct cultural and linguistic differences have created a racial achievement gap between White students and their marginalized peers (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

One notable outcome of trying to correct a student’s cultural or linguistic background is the practice of academic tracking. It has resulted in tracking practices that were rooted along racial and ethnic lines (Valencia, 1997b). Research further indicated that tracking contributes to

an achievement gap between students who are marginalized and their peers (Farkas, 2003; Oakes, 1995, Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). However, the elimination of tracking can have positive impacts on the academic success of students who are marginalized, but there is little willingness to look for solutions within the educational system itself (Garcia & Guerra, 2009, p. 151). As a result, tracking practices persist unchallenged in many institutions.

Schofield (2010) posited that research from other nations indicates that academically challenged students perform better when they are exposed to the learning environment alongside their higher achieving and higher-ability peers. Low achieving students subjected to a tracking system with only low-achieving peers show less growth after an academic year controlling for initial achievement (Schofield, 2010). As long as tracking is an accepted practice in school systems, the achievement gap will exist between those in the dominant context and those that are excluded from it.

Tracking also impacts the growth of White, middle and upper-income, English speaking students as they also miss out on a culturally enriching educational experience. Chambers (2009) found that students in high-ability tracks recognize their own shortcomings in terms of learning other cultural identities because they were never afforded the opportunity to “be around one another” (p. 424). In essence, they miss out on the cultural enriching experience that education can provide.

Deficit thinking is as much about the preconceived notions of stakeholders as it is about the actual practices that stem from such notions. When deficit thinking exists, every student suffers. A more democratic approach needs to be considered to change the way schools operate and challenge the assumptions that marginalize students (Shields, et al., 2004).

Democratic Education as a Framework for Eliminating Deficit Thinking

Eliminating the notion of deficit thinking is going to require a thorough examination of the current practices that promote it, a deep understanding of why and how it is prevalent, and action that deconstructs the system of education and rebuilds it with a shared understanding between all stakeholder groups—the dominant powers and marginalized groups. Delpit (1995) further suggested that the problem lies mainly with the educational system rather than with the families, parents, or students. These researchers have suggested that public school educators typically operate from a deficit-thinking perspective in regard to students who are marginalized. The power of the dominant discourse constrains the possibility of success if it attempts to address the needs of students who are marginalized simply through modifications of the dominant discourse. It is going to require a paradigm shift in the thought and behavior patterns of the current structure. It is going to require those with power to reposition the self.

Pearl (2010) found a democratic education is a replacement for deficit thinking; however, it required a change in culture that took time. Replacing deficit thinking with democracy will be successful if it is negotiated as a process of steps rather than a pre-packaged program. Each step is a hard won combination of understanding, support, and vigorous debate. According to the empirical evidence of Pearl and Knight (2010) the principles of a developed democratic curriculum were deliberative, negotiable, and inclusive; moreover, they were framing ideas, not prescriptive rules. They further purported that it was not possible to achieve a democratic outcome, such as social justice, in the absence of a democratic process. In order to replace deficit thinking with a democratic education, it must be revisited in the context of a democratic process.

Democratic Education for Social Justice

A democratic education is a theory that all stakeholders, inclusive of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, engaged in an ongoing decision-making dialogue regarding the learning community in which they are actors (Møller, 2006). In a democratic education, all students are afforded an equitable education. In essence, schools must show that through schooling that democracy is a way of life that breaks sharply from the past (Bode, 1937).

For school leaders, the challenge involves moving from a culture of deficit thinking to one that embraces the lived experiences of the students who are marginalized. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olsen (2001) referred to the notion as pedagogy of difference. It required not only a deep immersion in the stories and practices of the tradition into which one is being initiated, but also opportunities to learn of other traditions and to experience them as well, though as something of an outsider considering whether or not to step inside.

Research shows that all students benefit when schools foster a democratic education because it provides an equitable opportunity to every student. Minority students perform better and have more rewarding school experiences when they are in a school environment that is sensitive to their culture and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2007). For this to occur, school leaders will need to lead staff to move beyond a system that pathologizes the cultures, languages, and traditional ways of living and knowing of the notably excluded from the dominant discourses (Shields et al., 2004). Leaders need to foster and grow cultures that promote a democratic education. When leaders fostered a democratic education that allowed teachers to create contexts for learning constructed within discourses that rejected pathologizing and deficit thinking, all

students—and especially students who are marginalized—were able to achieve academic excellence (Shields et al., 2004).

In order to change the culture of the education structure, school leaders must work to reframe concepts that have been identified within pathologizing discourses: agency, community, social justice, deep democracy, and academic excellence (Shields et al., 2004). Each area contributed to a child's learning environment; each fostered a child's lived experience. The elimination of deficit thinking and the creation of an equitable and equal learning environment came to fruition when these domains of experience were addressed and reconstructed through a repositioning of the self.

Agency as a Tool of Balancing Power

In the traditional and contemporary setting, the interactions and experiences each stakeholder brought to the learning environment played out in the form of roles. These roles were defined in terms of interactions and presented themselves in the learning context of an academic setting. Cummins (2001) noted the need to challenge the exclusion of human relationships from our understanding of what constitutes effective education. Ogbu (1987) found status and power relations between groups were an important part of any comprehensive account of minority students' school failure. Both educators and students have been cultivated to replicate their experiences in power struggles that result in unfortunate scenarios in the academic setting. As Valencia (1997) posited, these experiences were generational and created a greater challenge for agents of change.

The roles of students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds have been shaped by their experiences with the dominant culture, and quite often their unfamiliarity with the dominant culture has resulted in negative experiences. Students' non-compliance with school

directives, although due to unfamiliarity, and the empowered staffs' misunderstanding of some students' apathetic or aggressive behavior becomes a dominant context of interaction. Instead of providing interventions or cultivating an understanding of these differences, discipline emerged as one of the primary practices through which the pedagogic encounters were framed, regulated, and managed (Shields et al., 2004). Academic progress was slowed when conflict prevailed.

Student achievement is influenced by teachers' perceptions and expectations of the individual student. Experiences and perceptions informed the choices and responses of the actors and constrained the possibilities and potential contained in educator-student relationships (Shields et al., 2004). Although it is not always intentional, such encounters hamper the efforts to grow a democratic environment that promotes achievement. In order for there to be a framework to construct a democratic education, teachers need to understand how these perceptions and expectations are made evident to students through normative discourse patterns in the classroom, through discourse rules and participation rights, and through teacher and student script patterns that develop in the classroom (Ball, 2002, p. 84).

As a consequence of this struggle on the education stage, schools often revert to authoritarian and disciplinarian roles in response to the real and perceived differences between the cultures or lived experiences of those in power (schools) and those in submissive roles (students and parents). Lipman (1998) found students tended to dismiss an institution when they were not included, especially when their role models were generally marginalized by the institution's practices. Ogbu (1992) found when students are alienated by the dominant discourse, when the prevailing norms and customs failed to relate to their lived cultural experiences, they tended to create their own set of rules with their own identity. Consequently, these new groups often act against the norms of the dominant culture that marginalized their

lived experiences. When groups relinquished their identity, land, culture, and values, there was a rapid descent into poverty and a breakdown of the family structure (Shields et al., 2004). The cost of assimilating is devastating, yet the structure of the education system is a dominant culture where many assimilated students act against their adopted culture. What ensues is a continuous power struggle in the academic setting between the dominant discourse and that of the marginalized.

The power struggle plays out in various forms; nonetheless, it marginalizes one group when the outcome is a power imbalance. As Foucault (1980) discovered, power works on and through individuals as they take up positions offered to them in discourse and as they become objects of discourse. In addition, Hall (1997) explained that “knowledge is always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice” (p. 75). The power associated with the role each actor plays in a relationship negatively impacts the learning outcomes of one group when the power is imbalanced.

In order for a school leader to overcome power imbalances, the lived experiences of all students must be recognized and embraced. Brown (2006) found that as stakeholders grew in a realization of their own agency, they increased their commitment and ability to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups. When this occurs, learning will be understood as a process through which participants acquire “a critical understanding of how the self recognizes others as subjects rather than objects of history . . . as part of a broader effort to re-imagine schools as democratic public spheres” (Giroux, 1999, p. 111). Any serious attempt to reverse underachievement must challenge both the devaluation of identity that these students have historically experienced and the societal power structure that perpetuated this pattern (Cummins, 2001).

In order to create a performance where all actors have the same opportunities to participate, the power balances must shift. The shift must be to one that promotes tolerance and understanding despite the noticeable and perceived differences; it must foster a shared understanding. It is not only the responsibility of educational leaders to assess their own agency; it is the nature of being an adult human to realize one's agency through increasingly expanding awareness and critical reflection (Brown, 2006).

Community as a Tool for Creating Inclusion

It is critically important to acknowledge that learning, like living, occurs in social groups, and groups with the power to build schools, develop curriculum, and influence pedagogies often seem oblivious to the ways in which schools perpetuate inequities (Shields et al., 2004). In a community, relationships are the key to building trust between different groups, trust that can be capitalized to make decisions in the best interest of all those involved in the civic engagement (Putnam, 1994). Buber (1939) posited that relationships were built through dialogue to establish trust. Unfortunately, the current education system fails to create this sense of community and trust by marginalizing students that are not privy to the social and cultural capital of the dominant group.

Current learning structures continue to marginalize children when it affords certain privileges to some and excludes others. Learning does indeed occur in social groups, and when students who are marginalized are left out of the dominant group conversations, they learn to feel inadequate, neglected, and marginalized. When these conversations center around the educational setting, these students grow detached from the context of the school structure.

In order to create a sense of belonging and to validate the experiences and voices of students who are marginalized, schools must foster a single community that advocates a new

center for the school community. The new community must reject existing practices and homogenize the diversity within a given school (Shields et al., 2004). Shields (2003) referred to this notion as a community of difference. In such a community, understanding must be grounded in some explicit, negotiated and shared beliefs about fundamental principles, processes, and values, not just on common norms. There needs to exist a shared understanding about the purpose of the school, a shared understanding about the vision of a school, and a shared understanding that every stakeholder has a valid and appreciated role in the new learning environment that impacts their quality of life.

The inclusion of all stakeholders, not based on representation but because of their mere presence, must have a say in the education realm that is considerate of their norms and values. As Starratt (1991) insisted, each person must be treated with “absolute regard.” Students who are marginalized have had little say in the policy and curriculum that transpires in the school center.

A sense of community will emerge when participants are willing to negotiate and articulate the status quo of schools and how they can be more inclusive. Hall (1997) contended that schools have to do more than negotiate; they have to negotiate with purpose. Simply infusing new perspectives into existing priorities will only perpetuate the marginalization of students. Marginalization will end and respectful conversations will begin when curriculum implementation involves the central participation of the excluded and marginalized (Hall, 1997, p. 25).

To develop communities of difference—communities in which students are able to be full members of the community, in which they are able to participate fully—it is important that students do not receive the message that their families are somehow deficient or that they are less important or defective in any way. A blaming the victim mentality cannot exist in a community

of difference. Thus, in order for schools to create an inclusive community, they must develop some criteria against which to judge decisions to guide their actions and dialogue (Shields et al., 2004).

Social Justice as a Tool of Validation

A democratic community and social justice rely on one another. A democratic community embraces conversations that create a shared understanding about student differences. Social justice is the fostering of practices in education and practical experience that invites all educators and learners to empathize with and experience the world through the eyes of their students and peers, especially the marginalized. Ideally, students of social justice enter the world with a platform for social change by bringing equity and equality to every endeavor. An education based in social justice can break the perpetuation of deficit thinking. Unfortunately, this type of educational approach is often difficult to achieve in a culture entrenched in status quo.

Deficit thinking is perpetuated through recycled preconceptions about the limited abilities of students from varying cultural groups. Policies and practices based on deficit learning are detrimental to the marginalized. Anything from tracking, mainstreaming, and attendance policies can subject students who are marginalized to feelings of inadequacy. In many of these policies, students' cultural practices are often the subject of such policy. The dominant assumption is that mainstream culture, institutions, policies, and practices are the correct ones, and that the marginalized children must adapt in order to succeed according to the terms of the dominant culture (Ravitch, 2009; Shields et al., 2004).

In order to break this cycle, an education must be just, empathetic, democratic, and optimistic (J. L. Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995). It is difficult to separate the four aspects of social

justice identified above in that if education is not just, it cannot be democratic; if it is neither just nor democratic, it cannot be optimistic; moreover, if it deforms those it is intended to serve, there is no way it can truly be empathetic (Shields et al., 2004). A closer look at an education that is just, emphatic, democratic, and optimistic reveals what an education for social justice looks like.

An education is just. In a social justice system, it is imperative that a teacher's attitudes and beliefs about his or her students exemplify social justice. Too often, a teacher's perception about the abilities and possibilities of students who are marginalized limit what a student is able to do and learn. When this is allowed to fester in the classroom, it perpetuates the deficit thinking model and recycles negative assumptions. Coupled with this deficit thinking is the belief that teachers need to change students in order for them to succeed in the dominant school structure. Unfortunately, it is often by way of changing the student's beliefs and challenging his or her values that teachers try to change students to fit the existing framework.

This practice creates a struggle for students who are marginalized. The notion that the abilities of students who are marginalized need to change creates an internal conflict for some students regarding their home and cultural values (Valencia, 1997a). When this ensued, it created an environment where schooling was explicitly intended to eradicate family values and traditions; it could not be perceived as socially just (Shields et al., 2004).

Green (1998) posited the notion of an egalitarian society where educators moved beyond trying to fix students' differences and ceased seeing the world through an "us vs. them" lens. Rather, it encourages educators to embrace students as part of something greater than the individual so that all stakeholders can start working on commonalities and foster a "we" mentality to pave the way for a just education. Brown (2004) found assessing beliefs in an effort to make them known and subject to critical analysis was an important first step in the process.

An education is democratic. The United States population is built on diversity, rich with languages and cultures; unfortunately, it is those differences that often lend themselves to deficit thinking practices. It is the very uniqueness of language and culture that permits deficit thinking to foster and create obstacles to a deep democracy. When all stakeholders are invited to partake in conversations regarding the operations of a school, the writing of curriculum, or the creation of policy, the school is promoting democracy. When these intentions are guided by an understanding that some groups are represented due to various barriers, then the activity essentially alienates a sector of the community; it marginalizes the group even though it is allowing them to participate. This takes place, perhaps unintentionally but pervasively, in various forms for some students.

Language differences are a significant perpetuator of marginalization. Shields et al. (2004) found a common form of marginalization is conducting business with people in a language in which they are unfamiliar with the intent of taking the power balance is quite undemocratic (Shields et al., 2004). English as a Second Language families are often victims of this undemocratic process. When inundated with forms, communications, and other mediums in a language that they have a hard time comprehending, uninformed choices are often made. Consequences could lead to situations where students are tracked inappropriately, miss out on additional resources, and miss the opportunity to build relationships with the school community. Unless there is a concerted effort to provide the access and opportunity for the unique languages to partake in the conversation, democracy is deemed a privilege for those with the language skills and out of reach for those without the dominant language skills.

Cultural differences also create contexts for exclusion in the education system. Diversity can be a valuable tool in the process of conversation and in the creation of a new structure. The

history and culture of marginalized groups are essential to the creation of a new conversation aimed at the elimination of deficit thinking (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995). Democracy requires a deliberate effort to change the power structure to facilitate the participation of those who have been excluded from the processes and decision-making forums. Until the issues associated with the difference in languages and cultures are addressed, a democratic school can never exist.

An education that is emphatic. Empathy is not a soft, fuzzy, or nebulous quality antithetical to rigorous intellectual inquiry; it is not anti-intellectual, but a pedagogical approach that takes into consideration the interests, aspirations, and aptitudes of the learner as fundamental to learning and understanding (Shields et al., 2004). Empathy in education is the notion that learning can be rigorous and informative, but it takes into consideration the lived realities of the students and how each will respond or not respond to subsequent curriculum, policy, etc. It becomes not a question of which material is or is not important, but how the material is prefaced, examined, and assessed pursuant to the experiences and cultures of the students who may or may not be alluded to in the learning context.

Noddings (1992) suggested an emphatic education changes almost every aspect of schooling: the current hierarchical structure of management, the right mode of allocating time, the kind of relationships encouraged, the size of schools and classes, the goals of instruction, modes of evaluation, patterns of interaction, and selection of content (p. 221). Green (1998) posited the success of a society is commensurate with how well it empathizes with those who have the least. Johnson (1997) explained that an empathetic imagination allows individuals to imagine oneself in different situation and conditions at past and future times to better understand how an individual or group responds in the present context. The idea of empathy requires careful

consideration of everything schools do to meet the needs and validate the lived experiences of all learners.

Empathy requires the re-examination of the ways in which students are taught and the recognition that teachers no longer teach to a homogenous student group. Instructional content that is relevant to the lived experiences of students who are marginalized must have room in the curriculum whether or not it makes the instructor feel uncomfortable. Skirting materials for fear they might hurt the feelings or question the culture of a specific student or group that differs from that of the teacher is not educating them. Ignoring such topics is a form of pathologizing the existence of the student or group, thereby perpetuating deficit thinking because the perceptions and assumptions are never addressed and openly discussed. Taking the time to preface the material to build a more sophisticated understanding of the differences in cultures and values, perhaps demonstrating the strengths of such an understanding, is the core of an emphatic education; it is empathy that permits us to respond “differentially” to our students (Shields et al., 2004). Reconsidering practices with a pulse on empathy will help curb deficit thinking that is perpetuated by the dominant culture.

An education that is optimistic. Too often, stakeholders of marginalized groups are made to feel confused, excluded, and unable to participate fully in a dominant mode of thought that differs from or alienates their own cultural experiences (Delpit, 1990). When this occurs in schools, educators place the blame for poor school performance on the children and their families. There is little understanding how the dissonance between the culture of schooling and that of the home and community disadvantages children. When this occurs, the education they receive cannot be optimistic (Shields et al., 2004). Such a closed structure fails to open doors of

opportunity or windows of understanding; it erects yet another barrier to the full participation of the students.

Educators must be cautious not to offer images of community that the educators feel are beyond the reach of students who are marginalized. On the one hand, students are urged to change behaviors as the behavior is somehow a barrier to student success. On the other hand, some educators carry affirming beliefs that the students from marginalized populations will never truly belong and that success is unattainable. When students from a marginalized group feel inadequate or find that their experiences do not mesh with that of the dominant culture, there becomes a need to create their own identity that validates the individual's experience (Ogbu, 1992). Furthermore, these behaviors contradict those of the dominant culture and a student develops a dysfunctional oppositional culture that leads them to believe that they cannot be both academically successful and ethnically different (Ogbu, 1987). Freire and Macedo (1995) argued that such divisions lead not only to a form of essentialism, but also made it more difficult for these groups to dismantle the oppressive structures that robbed them of their humanity (p. 398). Until marginalized groups are met with an optimistic opportunity and experience, students from these cultures will continue to find alternate paths and be left out of the dominant mode of thought.

Deep Democracy as a Tool to Build a Shared Understanding

The notion of a community of difference connects to the theory of deep democracy (Green, 1999). Democracy, in the traditional sense, is about majority rule. The group with the most votes wins power, privilege, etc., but this is often detrimental to the minority group. The marginalized group is a part of this democratic process, but their voices tend to get lost in the current democratic structure. In essence, they participate in the democratic process, but their lack

of numbers (physical) prevents their voices from being heard. Green maintains that this is quite different from a deep democracy that expresses the experience-based possibility of more equal, respectful, and mutually beneficial ways of community life.

A deep democracy is more than the concept of “one person, one vote” that perpetuates the oppression and marginalization of those who are rightfully full members of a community, but cannot access mechanisms of power and decision-making through so-called “democratic” processes because their numbers are minimal (Green, 1999). Deep democracy is not a simpler form of democracy, but one that embraces challenges to the status quo by validating every member’s need or position despite the size or numbers of the group to which the individual identifies.

A deep democracy provides a platform so all groups have a chance to engage in the conversation; all stakeholders, even those of groups with small numbers, can debate the policies and practices of the education system. Gutmann (1990) explained public debate is the real mark of democracy. She purported that debate afforded all stakeholders the opportunity to engage in open communication, consider various perspectives, reflect on the new knowledge, and make informed decisions inclusive of these traditionally marginalized voices. Conflict should be expected if pluralism and diversity are taken seriously for that will lead to the deliberation of voices (Glass, 2003). In education, conversation allows for the amplification of those who are excluded or marginalized. In essence, conflict and deliberation are welcomed and necessary parts of the process, not something to be feared.

As a result of this deliberation, patterns are revisited to allow the conveying, sharing, and embracing of knowledge that results in changes or reaffirmations of behavior (Bode, 1937).

Deliberation afforded by a deep democracy creates opportunities for fundamental change that move beyond “tinkering” to redress current inequities (Shields et al., 2004).

Educators can too often believe change is about getting students to become more like the dominant culture by changing the student to fit the role of the dominant discourse pervasive in schools (Valencia, 1997a). Attempting to enforce ethnic, linguistic, and/or religious homogeneity is far more likely to foster disunity than to ameliorate it (May, 1999). The complexity of situations can never be truly understood until the voices of everyone involved are given due process. If not, then key insight into such situations as achievement gaps and failure rates will never be fully understood. Deep democracy is about bringing every stakeholder to the conversation to grow a new and shared understanding and a new way of schooling based on dialogue rather than majority rule.

Academic Excellence as a Tool for Systemic Change

It appears possible that if we change the environments, the discourses, the attitudes, the positioning, and the relationships within our schools, it will create the conditions under which all groups of students will achieve outcomes that are similar in range and scope to those of their peers (Shields et al., 2004). Teachers are the front line in the opportunity to create schools of equity and equality. It is their actions and understanding that drive the achievement and abilities of students. Changing the system must be considered by school leaders because when the system tried to change the students, students remained marginalized no matter how much they adapted (Garza & Garza, 2010; Ryan, 1999). If educators fail to act in the best interest of all students and neglect the responsibility to better understand the lived experiences of those they teach, achievement outcomes will not improve.

Education leaders must anticipate how dominant group practices impact the learning and lives of students who are marginalized, how the dominant culture maintains control over the various aspects of education, and how they perpetuate this pattern of domination. There is a deep antipathy to acknowledging that schools tend to reflect the power structure of the society and that these power relations are directly relevant to educational outcomes (Cummins, 2001). School leaders must help teachers recognize how their power, relationships and interactions with students who are marginalized impact student learning (Shields et al., 2004).

Re-Positioning the Self to Create an Equitable Education

The power of the dominant discourse constrains the possibility of success if one attempts to address the needs of marginalized children simply through modifications of the dominant discourse. Many educational change efforts appear to stall or to come to a halt because educators were unwilling to assume responsibility for students' low achievement and failure (Berman & Chambliss, 2000). School reform efforts failed because deficit beliefs became a filter that blocked educators' abilities to examine their assumptions and to look beyond traditional solutions for real and meaningful change (García & Guerra, 2004). A leader that advocates for and works to eliminate deficit thinking is going to have to reposition the self and move teachers to reposition themselves in the context of providing an equitable education.

Freire and Macedo (1995) shared an insightful look at just why it was important for school leaders to move teachers beyond their current understanding of privilege as a deterrent to understanding their power relationships:

A White teacher remarked that "we should spend at least three weeks getting to know each other so as to become friends before taking on sensitive issues as racism." In other words, this White teacher failed to recognize her privileged position that enabled her to assume she can negotiate the terms under which classmates from oppressed groups can

state their grievances. It is as if in order to be able to speak the truth about racism or to denounce racist structures, non-Whites must first befriend their White classmates. The inability of this White teacher to acknowledge her privileged position in demanding to negotiate her comfort zone before grievances against racism are made makes her unable to realize that, in most instances, certain groups such as African Americans are born and live always without any comfort zone. (p. 380)

Teachers need to recognize that their life experiences have afforded them privileges and comforts some students do not have. This is a critical realization for teachers.

In order for reform to create meaningful opportunities for all students to succeed, educators need to take seriously the need to reflect on their training, assumptions, attitudes, positioning, and practices to ensure that deficit thinking is eradicated (Shields et al., 2004). Shields et al. (2004) found when educators reflected deeply by challenging their assumptions and the foundations of their practice, and repositioned themselves within discourses of self-determination, then education could become more inclusive, democratic, and optimistic for marginalized children. Cummins (2001) posited that implementation of change is dependent upon the extent to which educators, collectively and individually, redefined their roles with respect to minority students and communities. Giroux (1999) explained that teachers and other cultural workers needed to redefine their roles in order to provide an education that models the citizen we want to create. More succinctly, Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1995) posited that educators cannot think of overcoming oppression without political pedagogical projects that point to the transformation or the reinvention of the world. Providing a balance to the current power imbalances will incite change that sanctions new relationships with students and new understandings of their lived experiences.

Furthermore, Shields et al. (2004) found when educators were challenged to examine their assumptions and practices, and repositioned themselves within discourses that offer solutions rather than blame, they posited for the development of pedagogical practices that are

more socially just and that facilitated more optimistic outcomes for students who are marginalized (p. 256). Cummins (2001) found in the absence of individual and collective educator role redefinitions, schools continued to reproduce, in these interactions, the power relations that characterized the wider society and make minority students' academic failure inevitable. Helping educators identify how their roles can be seen as authoritative and working with them to shift the power relations to marginalized students will help foster a more equitable learning environment.

Ignoring the power struggles can no longer be tolerated. Giroux (2002) explained that ignorance and arrogance cannot be excuses to perpetuate educational inequities; rather, educators must provide for reason, analysis, and critical understanding in the affirmation of democratic principles of justice. Berman and Chambliss (2000) explored a shift in educators' thinking as a significant precondition for the successful implementation of systemic change. Challenging assumptions is critical to allow for the repositioning of the self to allow for a democratic approach to education.

Garza and Garza (2010) found change is not going to come by fixing the student or getting him or her to adapt to the current system. Change is going to come when teachers reposition themselves and reconsider the abilities and possibilities of the individual. They conclude their research with the following:

The challenge for educators is ever present; we must continue to renew our commitment. We must find ways to honor, dignify, and incorporate the knowledge of Mexican American children, families, and communities in our classrooms. There is much to gain by using the strengths of Mexican American children to strengthen ourselves personally and professionally. (p. 205)

Changing a seasoned educator's thought process is daunting, but it is necessary. Such a daunting task can result in meaningful pedagogical change when it is tied to a school leader that also

posits that he or she challenge his or her own assumptions and fosters an environment that encourages every educator to challenge their assumptions.

Leadership Role in Fostering a Democratic Education

Change cannot be meaningfully implemented until all stakeholders in the dominant discourse engage in the rejection of deficit thinking. More specifically, Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999) found the explicit rejection of deficit thinking was the single most important initiating factor in improving the academic achievement of marginalized children. The role of a leader for a democratic education is to reject current educational practices that perpetuate deficit thinking. Scheurich and Laible (1995) found that schools need to foster leaders that are committed to all children. Schools are no longer in a position to allow exceptions by race, gender, class, or any other exclusionary category. Leaders must not succumb to his or her dominant role, but rather put themselves in the shoes of an outsider (Weiner, 2006). Brown (2006) purported that leadership in a democratic education challenged exclusion, isolation, and marginalization of the stranger; responded to oppression with courage; empowered the powerless; and transformed existing social inequalities and injustices. In all regards, a democratic leader moves beyond status quo by fostering a democratic education that challenges deficit thinking.

A school leader for a democratic education questions the positioning of school policy and practices within cultural deficit theorizing. Freire (1995) encouraged school leaders to consider a rediscovery of power such that the more critically aware learners become, the more they are able to transform society and subsequently their own reality. Leaders can start this practice without waiting for policies or pedagogies to emerge that substantiate or reinforce the need for change.

Garcia and Guerra (2004) developed an empirically based framework for the deconstruction of deficit thinking among educators. The framework reinforces the importance of professional development that identifies elements of the school culture and the school climate that lead to institutional practices that systematically pathologize differences. Several suggestions are offered to promote leading for educational change and to foster a democratic education: engaging in curriculum as a conversation, providing a justice-oriented education, promoting multi-cultural instruction, and affording all students access to gifted and honors programs/providing the same rigor and expectations in all class levels.

Curriculum as Conversation

Leaders engage staff in curriculum conversations to address what is being taught and how it impacts what students are learning. More specifically, the notion of the unintended curriculum or hidden curriculum can be articulated to see how it promotes deficit thinking. One of the key components of the curriculum debate is the idea that someone or some group decides what is taught. This spurs such questions as who gets to decide it, why it is decided, and how it is taught and assessed. Increasing teachers' understandings of intercultural communication is therefore expected to contribute to more culturally responsive interactions with students and with families and to enhance instruction (García & Guerra, 2004).

Grumet (1995) further explained that curriculum is about relationships that develop between and amongst teachers and students. Tapping the experiences of the teachers and learners in subject matter allows them to become experts in some area of the conversation so they will be more willing to engage in the learning. Too often, the groups left out of this curriculum conversation are the people who most need to be part of the process—the marginalized who continue to be excluded in education practice.

Justice-Oriented Education

Westheimer and Kahne (2008) examined how a school's educational program can foster the notion of justice-oriented citizenship and a culturally-relevant education. Furthermore, culturally relevant teachers care personally about their students; they share and understand the culture of their students and interweave the students' culture and language into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2007). A school leader can support project-based learning that affords students opportunities to learn of and act on social injustices. A focus on a justice-oriented citizenship as part of the students' course of learning can foster a more culturally accepting society.

Multi-Cultural Education

Another educational practice that promotes a democratic education is one based on a multi-cultural perspective. As an example, schools need to foster a learning environment that is respectful of different heritages by infusing them into the course of study. Celebrating a demographically recognized heritage once a year with such things as an assembly or some other planned activity, yet never bringing the discussion into the classroom, promotes exclusion of the heritage. Yoon, Simpson, and Haag (2010) found when multicultural literatures were used for the purpose of critical multicultural education, teachers helped students become engaged in critical discourses of ideology and social action (p. 109).

The approach presented the opportunity for teachers to engage in dialogue outside the normal textbooks that traditionally espouse dominant norms and values. Affording students opportunities to interact with texts that are as diverse as the changing educational landscape prepares them for the dynamics of a global world with an appreciation and understanding of the complexities of a diverse world. For students who are marginalized, a strong, positive ethnic identity is associated with high self-esteem, a commitment to doing well in school, a sense of

purpose in life, confidence in one's own efficacy, and high academic achievement (Violand-Sánchez & Hainer-Violand, 2006).

Access and Rigor

Providing students who are marginalized the access to honors and gifted programs that have traditionally excluded them is another action a leader for a democratic education can instill (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). An informed leader looks beyond the current academic status of students with an understanding that students have a knack for curiosity and academic achievement. The current structure deters the possibilities of some students. In an effort to close the achievement gap, students who are marginalized need exposure to highly rigorous curriculum with a supporting structure that provides them with the resources to close the gap and maintain the effort.

Conclusion

Valencia (1997b) challenged educators to build an understanding of deficit thinking and its impact on educational practices. Shields (2004) posited that when educators overcame marginalizing assumptions and practices, and repositioned themselves within discourses that offer solutions rather than blame, they then argued for the development of pedagogical practices that provided a more equitable education for students. Based on these findings, I created an exploratory framework to study the role of secondary school leaders in eliminating deficit thinking (Figure 1). With this framework, a solid understanding of deficit thinking emerged through transformative leadership that promotes an equitable education for students who are marginalized.

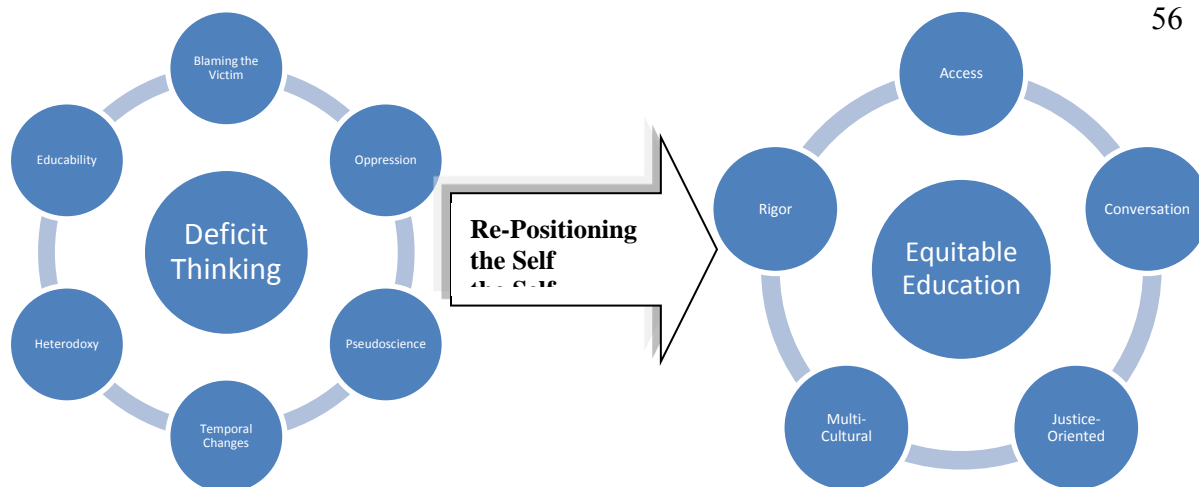


Figure 1. The role of a principal is to help educators overcome deficit thinking by re-positioning the self to promote practices that foster an equitable education.

Weiner (2006) claimed that a paradigm shift was not easy and was seldom welcomed by those entrenched in the comfort of status quo. He asserted the following:

Educators may become discouraged when they come face-to-face with hitherto unquestioned practices and conditions because they know that they cannot eliminate these practices on their own. What we can all do, however, is acknowledge that deficit explanations exist and examine them critically. Invariably, this illuminates possibilities that have eluded us, including strategies that focus on student strengths. (p. 43)

A paradigm shift in the current educational context will lend itself to the possibility of a different educational experience that provides an equitable education to all students.

Davies and Harre (1997) claimed that it is the possibility of alternatives that offers solutions to address the academic achievement of marginalized children. The possibilities for change are limitless, but alternatives are needed. With change comes a new possibility of an educational structure that is equitable and accessible to all learners, especially students that have been marginalized by traditional education discourse. Any serious attempt to reverse the underachievement of students who are marginalized must challenge both the devaluation of identity these students have historically experienced and the societal power structure that perpetuates this pattern (Cummins, 2001).

In this successful schooling experience, educators help students and themselves make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Weiner, 2003). Shields et al. (2002) posited:

As we struggle to understand how issues of race and ethnicity affect the educational experiences for all students, we must work to overcome our prejudices by listening carefully to those whose backgrounds, perspectives, and understandings differ from our own. We must examine popular assumptions as well as the politically correct stereotypes that educators often use to explain what is happening in today's multicultural society and its increasingly ethnically heterogeneous schools. Engaging in socially just leadership requires us to maintain an open conversation, to examine and reexamine our perceptions and those of others, constantly looking beneath the surface and seeking alternative explanations and ways of understanding. (p. 134)

Replacing the traditional mode of deficit thought with one that promotes an equitable education will benefit all learners and transcend all members of society. School leaders need to advocate for a shift from personal awareness to social action, reminding us that respect for diversity entails advocacy, solidarity, an awareness of societal structures of oppression, and critical social consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1995). Ultimately, when school leaders challenge deficit thinking practices and foster an equitable education, space will be created to provide equity and equal access to every student in the public education system.

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how principals in secondary school settings eliminated deficit thinking in order to improve the academic, social, emotional, and cultural growth of students who are marginalized. Marginalized in this study refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers and who are treated differently because of these differences (García & Guerra, 2004). This chapter describes the procedures used to examine how principals impacted school communities to promote an equitable education free of deficit thinking practices.

This section includes an overview of methodology, my personal standpoint, ethical considerations, participant and site selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations. The primary focus of this study was to examine the role principals play in eliminating deficit thinking. In order to do so, it addresses the following sub-questions:

1. How do secondary school principals define deficit thinking?
2. How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies do secondary school principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?
4. What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?
5. What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?

Overview of Methodology

I approached the study with Bogdan and Bilken's (2007) five characteristics of qualitative research: the research should be natural, it should utilize descriptive data, it should be

concerned with the process, it should employ an inductive approach, and it should be meaningful. The research tradition I utilized is a qualitative multi-case study or “collective case study” (Creswell, 2007) because it provides multiple sources of information. This will allow me to follow Lincoln and Guba’s (2000) case study structure: the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned.

I considered a quantitative or mixed-methods study to examine the data related to deficit thinking, but I recognized that the issue of deficit thinking cannot be found in numbers. Deficit thinking exists in the actions and beliefs of the educators and administrators that interact with students on a regular basis. Gillborn (2010) found that quantitative approaches often encode particular assumptions about the nature of social processes and the generation of educational inequality that reflect a generally superficial understanding of racism. To understand deficit thinking, it is important to understand the people and processes that perpetuate deficit thinking practices.

Furthermore, statistical methods themselves encode particular assumptions which, in societies that are structured in racial domination, often carry biases that are likely to further discriminate against particular marginalized groups (Gillborn, 2010). He further purported that quantitative research risks falling into the trap of blaming the victim.

By focusing on how much inequality is associated with particular student identities (including class, gender, race, family structure and maternal education), such research can give the impression that the problem arises from those very identities—rather than being related to social processes that give very different value to such identities, often using them as a marker of internal deficit and/or threat. (p. 272)

Therefore, in this study I used a qualitative approach to understand the beliefs and actions of principals who work to eliminate deficit thinking practices.

Ladson-Billings (2007) found that qualitative inquiry afforded researchers the opportunity to construct narratives, or chronicles, out of historical, socio-cultural and political contexts. The purpose of the chronicle is to give readers a context for understanding the way inequality manifests in policy, practice, and people's experiences. Such an approach was successfully conducted by Garza and Garza (2010) in their multi-case examination of how teachers' perceptions, experiences, and beliefs impacted the success or failure of low-SES Mexican American children and greatly informed Valencia's (1997b) work in *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking*.

Miles and Huberman (1984) found that a structured approach helped to ensure the comparability of data across sources and researchers and are thus particularly useful in answering variance questions and questions that deal with differences between things and their explanation" (p. 64). The literature suggested that the problem of deficit thinking is best understood not as a contemporary practice, but as a thought process that continues to morph in the education realm since the inception of the American schooling system (Valencia, 1997b). Pearl (1997) posited that democratic education is a process that replaces deficit thought practices and leads to more equity and equality in the education system. To help understand the workings of deficit thinking, a case study approach allowed me to explore the process in depth (Creswell, 2007).

My research sought to address the problem of deficit thinking. It is premised on Valencia's *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking* to build an understanding of deficit thinking in the context of contemporary education. I then examined the strategies each principal employed to eliminate deficit thinking in relation to the marginalization of students. Shields et al. (2004) framework for eliminating deficit thinking was employed to explore the issues principals face in

challenging deficit thinking practices. The results of the study are provided to bring insight into the experiences of principals who challenge deficit thinking practices in secondary school settings.

Personal Standpoint

I am empathetic to the marginalization of students. I am a member of a large and diverse family that was raised in an economically challenging environment, and I am still close with lifelong friends of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. More specifically, the experience of my family and my friends, along with my education, drew me to the world of teaching and learning. Although I constantly work to provide equity and equal access to all of my students and teachers, I am witness to the mistreatment of students who did not receive privileges afforded to others with mainstream linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. These experiences led me to administration, and that is what brings me to this topic of inquiry. I embarked on this research for those that are marginalized on a regular basis, often unintentionally, by the educators whose deficit beliefs and actions limit the potential of students from low-income and/or culturally/linguistically diverse communities.

For this study, I was primarily interested in exploring, understanding, and analyzing how two principals with visions of an equitable education eliminate deficit thinking. I was also guided by the notion of transformative leadership as discussed in Starratt (1991) and Weiner (2003) to understand how a transformative leader brings about ethical change. In doing so, I donned a critical lens to address the inequities that marginalize students.

The notion of transformative leadership is not embedded into the research questions; however, I work on the premise that if a principal is working to eliminate the deficit thinking of

teachers, then he or she is working to change the beliefs and actions of teachers. Transformative leadership inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded (Kose & Shields, 2009). Starratt (1991) posited a transformative leader strives for an ethical organization by focusing on three pillars: critique, justice, and caring. These pillars are consistent with Weiner's (2003) definition of transformative leadership as an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy and dialogue. The result of transformative leadership is that every student, despite cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic indicators, is afforded an equitable education complete with the same access and privileges of students from non-marginalized groups.

The study does not focus on the success of each principal as the curriculum and instruction leader. Principals working to eliminate deficit thinking are working to change not only the actions, but the beliefs of teachers who work with the marginalized student groups every day. Instead, this study focuses on the process of implementing strategies to transform the attitudes and actions from that of deficit thinking to attitudes and actions rooted in equity.

According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), critical social theory concerns itself with issues of power and justice and the ways that race and social institutions construct a social system that marginalizes specific groups of people. Bogdan and Bilken (2007) defined critical theory as the critique of social organizations that privilege some at the expense of others. Deficit thinking is the practice of privileging students with the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural background of the dominant group at the expense of students from lower socio-economic status, or with different language and cultural norms. This study sought to address practices associated with deficit thinking in schools and how principals seek to eliminate such practices by

influencing the beliefs and actions of others. Therefore, I consider this study to fall under the umbrella of critical research.

Carspecken (1996) urged critical researchers to avoid bias to the extent possible. A critical researcher enters into a study with a desire to bring about change, but it was imperative that such a lens does not impact or influence the findings, especially in terms of qualitative inquiry. As the researcher, I was in a position of power. It was important for me to recognize my biases and position of power when I created my design and gathered my data.

Ethical Considerations

Although my study had IRB approval, it was important to continuously be cognizant of ethical considerations. Creswell (2007) cited the importance of ethical considerations “as we negotiate entry to the field site, involve participants, and ask participants to give considerable time to our projects” (p. 44). Merriam (2009) discussed the ethical dilemmas that are likely to occur in the study as a result of power imbalances. Furthermore, Hatch (2002) stressed the importance of reciprocity in our studies so participants can gain insight and knowledge that can inform their practice. The criteria are discussed in this section.

Gaining entry into meaningful sites was dependent on the purposeful sampling process. As such, field sites were dependent upon the principals selected for this study. This raised an ethical consideration. Principals selected for the study were identified by education professionals through a purposeful sampling approach as school leaders who worked to eliminate deficit thinking in their buildings. I stressed the importance of this quality in the selection process because it was critical to the integrity of the study. This prevented a principal from falsely purporting to address deficit thinking, and it deterred false data collection.

Additionally, the information shared during the study was often of a sensitive nature as the topic examined racial, cultural, and socio-economic indicators. I was sensitive to this data and did not probe too deeply by invading personal space. For example, if a principal indicated that he or she felt some policies or practices were ethnically or culturally motivated or knew of some instances involving specific stakeholders that operated under these motives, I did not push for any personally identifiable information like specific stakeholder's job title. I expected that some principals wanted to keep the study relatively quiet depending on the dynamics of the staff and the workings of the school culture. Finally, I am an advocate for the elimination of deficit thinking, and the identity of the research sites and principals in my study were not jeopardized by my advocacy lens.

I made it clear that the end result of this study was to complete my doctoral studies. I was not setting out to unravel the inequities that transcend public schools; in particular, I was not interested in putting the individual's school in the spotlight. However, based on my findings, each case had some exemplary programs that should be shared with the education community to help others strategize against deficit thinking.

Finally, I made participants aware of the benefits of this study. My hope is that the interview, the teacher surveys, and the data analysis have contributed to the gap in research and informed each participant's approach to eliminate deficit thinking. The study concluded with a presentation of my findings to each subject for the purpose of member-checking.

Participants and Site Selection

For this study, I located principals who were transforming the culture of their buildings to bring a more equal and equitable education to all students. In this study, I sought two principals

who employed strategies to eliminate deficit thinking. Since the purpose of this study was to examine how principals eliminate deficit thinking, it was important to identify principals that best afforded me the opportunity to foster a more sophisticated understanding about this role. For this collective case study, I employed purposeful sampling techniques. Purposeful sampling involved the deliberate selection of participants who were either experts on the phenomenon or witness to the events (Creswell, 2007; M. B. Miles & Huberman, 1984).

With guidance from superintendents, professors, and educational consultants, I began the process of purposeful sampling. The purposeful sampling approach provided me with case participants that significantly informed deficit thinking research as opposed to three random principals that may or may not have recognized deficit thinking practices nor employed strategies to eliminate deficit thinking. Therefore, random sampling was not appropriate for the purpose of this study because of the unique characteristics needed of the principals in the study. Purposeful sampling is best with only a limited number of sites feasible for the phenomenon being studied; random sampling relies on chance and the chances of finding principals employing strategies to eliminate deficit thinking was risky to this study. Purposeful sampling eliminated the risks associated with random sampling.

Once I had a pool of eight potential participants to inform my study, I engaged in several steps to insure I had the most qualified participants to conduct my study. I was chiefly looking for principals that met the following criteria: (a) he or she understood the concept of deficit thinking, and (b) he or she openly volunteered strategies they were using to address deficit thinking in their buildings. An introduction letter was mailed to all potential candidates, and a follow-up screening interview via telephone was employed to locate principals who met the two criteria. The screening questions were as follows:

1. Can you tell me about your current school, including teacher and student demographics and your school's mission and vision statement?
2. Can you define deficit thinking for me or give me an example of a marginalizing practice that you identified in your school?
3. Can you give an example of how you address it?

These questions were chosen for their significance to my selection of participants. Utilizing an Excel spreadsheet, I gathered and organized all of the potential participant's information, including his or her code name, school context information, responses to screening questions, and my analysis of each interview

The first question gathered contextual information about the participant and his or her building. Question one specifically provided background information about the school, staff, and student body. The student demographic information was important because I needed a diverse student body to address the purpose of this study. The vision statement cued me in as to whether the learning of all students was a part of the school's focus. When appropriate, a follow-up question helped me gauge whether it specifically included students of traditionally marginalized status and why that was important to the principal. The question also allowed me to assess how he or she truly emphasized the deliberate education of all students. I was able to gauge how much focus the principal placed on learning, and especially the learning of students who are marginalized.

I could not assume that if a principal was recommended to me that he or she was truly an advocate of an equitable education, let alone aware of the deficit practices that existed in the building. Questions two and three were asked to insure that I solicited participants that could contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of deficit thinking and the elimination of practices associated with deficit thinking.

Question two allowed me to determine how aware the principal was of marginalizing practices in the building. I was looking for responses that were indicative of someone that recognized the unfair treatment of students in the building. More specifically, I was looking for responses that recognized the unfair treatment of students of lower socio-economic status or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds whether or not the practices were intentional. Example responses I was looking for included principals who were cognizant that teachers blame students for poor academic performance, teachers feel parents of marginalized groups do not care, or that tracking is to the benefit of students.

It was important to find principals that were knowledgeable about deficit thinking practices, recognized it existed in their building, and believed that was their responsibility as the leader of the building to eliminate such practices. Question three allowed me identify specific practices that principals employed to address the marginalizing practices identified in question two. Example responses included discussing the elimination of tracking practices, involving stakeholders in leadership decisions, and discussing the rigor of courses that are predominately populated by marginalized groups. Additionally, I looked for principals who were addressing the deficit practices.

Anticipating there was a gatekeeper at each site, I was prepared to answer questions regarding the intricacies of my study to help foster a positive relationship with participants in the study (Creswell, 2007; Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). Anticipated questions included the following:

1. Why was the site chosen for the study?
2. What will be done at the site during the research study? How much time will be spent at the site by the researchers?
3. Will the researcher's presence be disruptive?
4. How will the results be reported?

5. What will the gatekeeper, the participants and the site gain from the study (reciprocity)?

I thought having these responses prepared ahead of time would help expedite the data gathering process while fostering transparency and establishing a positive rapport with the various participants at each site. As it turned out, I only interviewed the principal in each building and these questions were discussed before our first interview.

Data Collection

Creswell (2007) explained “the backbone of qualitative research is extensive data collection” (p. 43) and Maxwell (2005) indicated “collecting and analyzing data should be connected to issues of validity” (p. 10). Yin (2008) further suggested adhering to three principles of data collection: use multiple sources of evidence, create a case study database, and maintain a chain of evidence. Adhering to these three principles of data collection ensured that the final results reflected a concern for trustworthiness, and that they were worthy of further analysis.

For this study, data were gathered through a number of ways. Creswell (2007) proposed four methods of data gathering for a case study: observations, interviews, artifacts, and audio-visual sources. Yin (2003) proposed six forms: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. Despite the name and number of sources gathered, observations and interviews were the most crucial to a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2007). My data collection consisted of an initial interview with each school principal, an anonymous teacher survey, building visits to gather observational data, and a final interview with each principal to allow for member-checking.

Initial Interview

The interview is a significant piece of data collection and is critical in an intensive case study as indicative of this topic (Merriam, 2009). Once the two sites were selected, and I received

permission from each participant and his or her site to conduct the research, I began the process of collecting data by interviewing each principal. Stake (2006) suggested that important research questions cannot always be anticipated. A semi-structured approach allows for opportunities to formulate more purposeful questions dependent on the responses of the participant. Kvale (2006) suggested approaching the interviews as a conversation to better construct the stories of the participants. Being able to engage participants in a conversation required considerable work upfront to foster a trusting and relaxed environment. Prior to the interview, I spoke with each principal about their jobs, education, and other light topics. I also addressed their questions before the interview and indicated that I would approach the interviews like a conversation with a semi-structured approach. Therefore, the integrity of the interviews relied heavily on my ability to let the conversation drive the interview rather than structured and prepared questions.

Each interview lasted roughly one hour, and they were semi-structured, recorded, transcribed, organized, and coded accordingly. Although I prepared questions regarding the principal's knowledge of deficit thinking and his or her ability to identify, address and strategize to eliminate such practices (Appendix A), I anticipated additional questions would arise during the interviews and they did. The semi-structured approach allowed me to delve deeper into those responses. The responses built the foundation for the emergent themes that are discussed in chapters five and six.

Following Yin's recommendation, I developed the cases separately so as not to confuse the findings of one case with that of another. I sought to thoroughly examine the first interview, conduct my preliminary analysis and coding, and clarify any concerns or information before embarking on the initial interview with my second case. This allowed me to flush out my thoughts on the first single-case analysis. The same approach was taken after each interview.

Anonymous Teacher Survey

After the initial interview with each principal, I conducted an anonymous teacher survey of each staff (Appendix B) to gauge the existence of deficit thinking in each school and the principal's efforts to eliminate the practices. The survey was e-mailed to the staff at each school via Survey Monkey. Anonymity was guaranteed to staff members and a consent form was embedded into the survey. The survey could not be completed unless the consent box was checked.

The anonymous online survey (Appendix B) addressed several components as related to deficit thinking.

1. In question 1, staff is asked to consider a failing student and why the teacher feels the student is failing.
2. In question 2, staff is asked to gauge their perceptions as they relate to how well stakeholders address the needs of every student.
3. In question 3, staff is asked to gauge their perceptions as they relate to how well the education structure supports students who are marginalized.
4. Questions 4 and 5 gauged perceptions of staff as they relate to how well professional development is used to address the academic, social and emotional needs of every student.
5. In question 6, staff is asked to gauge their perceptions as they relate to how well the principal fosters relationships with various stakeholder groups, including the marginalized.
6. Questions 7-10 gauge the level of deficit thinking per economic status, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic differences.
7. Question 11 asks staff to share their years of experience.
8. Question 12 asks staff to share how they have changed in the past five years relative to meeting the needs of students who are marginalized.

The survey results were analyzed to determine how well the staff responded to the principals' claims that he or she employed strategies to eliminate deficit thinking. The results are shared and discussed in chapters four and five of this study.

Observations

After I administered each survey, I did an initial separate case analysis of each survey. Shortly thereafter, I visited each principal on two separate occasions over the course of a month to gather observational data. The observations allowed me to gather data regarding the conversations of each principal with staff members and the interactions the principals had with the different stakeholders in each building. Deliberate dialogue emerged as a prevalent theme so it was important to see the principal in action to build the single-case and multiple-case findings.

Follow-up Interviews

After I did a preliminary separate case analysis of each principal based on the first interview, the anonymous teacher survey, and the two observations, I met again with each principal. Prior to the follow-up interview, I shared the preliminary analysis to allow each principal to check the accuracy of my findings. I also used the second interview to delve deeper into possible themes. Specifically, the second interview focused on gathering more insightful data on the specific strategies the principal shared in the first interview. The follow-up interview also focused on how the principal addressed specific challenges to his or her efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. Most importantly, the final interview allowed me to ask more pointed questions regarding each principal's dialogic lens in addressing deficit thinking. This contributed significantly to the findings in the cross-case analysis.

Data Collection Instruments

Throughout the process, I gathered and coded as much essential data as possible by utilizing “thick description” (Carspecken, 1996; M. B. Miles & Huberman, 1984). Denzin (2005) defined thick description in qualitative research to mean the narrative “present detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationship so that the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 83). The use of thick description was a priority in this project. The use of thick description allowed me to delve deeper into the contexts and emotions of each principal. This approach resulted in the exploration and presentation of the emergent themes of deliberate dialogue and the dialogic lens of both principals as discussed in chapter VI.

Additionally, the importance of using reflection in the data gathering process was also stressed. Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to reflection as an integral part in developing themes, issues, problems and questions. They suggested utilizing a contact summary sheet to help reflect on data as they are gathered. I completed a contact summary sheet after each interview and observation. On each contact summary sheet, I noted date, location and purpose of the contact. I also reviewed main ideas, concepts or issues that were observed or shared. I did an initial coding of each idea, concept or issue, and wrote a narrative summary of the contact. Finally, I noted questions that emerged from the contact to ask about in a follow-up visit.

Holton (2008) suggested using memos as theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories. Memos were also used to help reflect on and analyze the data as they emerged during the analysis. The use of reflection by means of memos was useful in segregating the preliminary data and formulating ideas about the coding process. Whenever a thought occurred to me regarding my research and analysis, I referenced my memo

journal and reflected on the thought, whether it alluded to a single-case or cross-case analysis. The use of the memo contributed significantly to the development of the cross-case analysis.

The collection of data from the various data sources provided a means for triangulating the data to establish trustworthiness. Through the use of reflection in contact summary sheets and memos, I was able to disaggregate irrelevant data from recurring data. The recurring data from the interviews, observations and survey created the foundation for my single-case and cross-case analysis as discussed in chapters four, five, and six.

Coding for a Single-Case and Cross-Case Analysis

Tesch (1990) suggested that coding is the ongoing reaction to interpretation of the data that are collected; it is a fluid process. Creswell (2007) suggested that codes exist primarily for the context and description of the cases. In my study, the cases and context of each case were generated via the initial interviews and set the foundation for the coding framework. Additional codes emerged during the interviews and these advanced codes fell uniquely within individual cases and in a cross-case analysis. Assertions and generalizations also emerged during the coding of each case.

Stake (2006) enlisted coding to assist in the search for meaning in patterns. These patterns were found in the gathering and analysis of interviews, documents, observations, and surveys. Stake suggested that important meanings or critical findings emerge over and over again in the patterns; therefore, employing coding as a process and not a single act provided deeper meaning to my examination of deficit thinking practices and the strategies each principal employed.

To help categorize and organize the context codes and emerging codes, I employed a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet provided adequate space to record the thick description (Stake, 1994). I also paid particular attention to the notion of coding the raw data regularly after field experiences and continually revised my categories as new insights and data emerged. Tesch (1990) referred to this process as de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing data. With this approach to coding, data were deconstructed and reconstructed to fit in various categories pursuant to the criteria under examination. In each scenario, a single lens was employed to interpret my findings.

Additionally, I employed member-checking and triangulation strategies. After synthesizing the first interviews, surveys, and observations, each principal was afforded an opportunity to review my preliminary analysis. I was able to triangulate the findings from the interviews by cross-checking it with the surveys and the observations gathered during the research.

Finally, I interpreted the data from both a single case analysis and in a cross-case analysis. This was completed through my lens as a researcher and through the lenses of the conceptual frames established in the literature review. Merriam (2009) purported that such an approach allows the researcher to diligently explore each separate case and then use the information to develop more universal themes during the coding. This assisted in establishing trustworthiness and laid the foundation for additional research and inquiry.

Trustworthiness

Lather (1998) called for “new techniques and concepts for obtaining and defining trustworthy data which avoids the pitfalls of validation” (p. 66). For the purpose of this

qualitative study, I used the term trustworthiness to refer to the accuracy of the findings. It was imperative to this study that I carried out my research in the most ethical manner possible to insure its trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). This included checking my data collection and analysis for accuracy by employing member-checking techniques, triangulating my data, and using more than one lens to analyze my data (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009).

Member checking insured that there was no misinterpretation of what participants shared in the interviews (Creswell, 2007). Both principals were invited to proof the preliminary data after my analysis to ensure its accuracy and each received a final copy of the study

Triangulation is important because it provides credibility (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation occurred through an analysis and cross-checking of data from the individual interviews, surveys and observations. Specifically, the cultural beliefs of stakeholders, the specific strategies employed by the principals, and the impact of the principals' efforts were triangulated to insure the accuracy of my findings.

Considerations

Qualitative research is subject to inherent flaws based on biases and the subjectivity of the researcher and cases. Addressing the considerations when they emerged helped deter the biases and subjectivity from impeding upon the research findings.

One consideration concerned the participant pool. Before the study, it was unknown how many principals actually employed strategies to eliminate deficit thinking. Through a purposeful sampling approach, eleven were identified and two were selected for the study.

It is important to also note that although every candidate was recommended through a purposeful sampling approach with third parties, the respondents in this study, Sam and Leigh, are personal acquaintances. Both people met the standards for consideration as a case study; they

were familiar with practices that marginalized students in their building, they recognized these assumptions were based on preconceived notions, and they demonstrated practices that challenged the mindset of educators working from a deficit thinking paradigm. In fact, having an established relationship with the two respondents afforded the researcher uninhibited access to the buildings that contributed to a more thorough examination of the role of the principal in eliminating deficit thinking.

A second limitation in the study concerned the honesty of the principals in the interview. Although I prefaced this chapter about the importance of being upfront with principals regarding the purpose of this study, I recognized that some may have posited actions that were not consistent with their actual practices. The interviews, observations, and teacher surveys provided the means for triangulating the data to ensure accurate data was examined in this study.

A third consideration was my critical lens. Although I approached the study with a critical lens toward practices that marginalize students, I did not infuse my personal beliefs on any participants in the study. I approached each interview and observation with the intent to objectively capture each experience with as much thick description as possible. My personal insight is shared in the recommendations in chapter VI.

Significance of Research

School leaders face multiple obstacles that prevent them from leading to eliminate deficit thinking. Instead of focusing on a curriculum that prepares students to become civically engaged in the world, to become contributing members of society, and to learn of and empathize with the values and cultures of other groups, school leaders must devote much time and energy to the preparation of students for a single standardized test that focuses explicitly on math and reading.

The emphasis of standardized testing undermines moral accountability for deep and equitable change and promoting transformative education which is the premise of eliminating deficit thinking (e.g., Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

This study sought to fill a gap in literature regarding overcoming deficit thinking at the secondary school level. There is little research in American schools examining the specific strategies principals employ and the challenges faced by principals who address deficit thinking, and there is a lack of evidence that examines how a principal describes the impact of eliminating deficit thinking on the intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural life of students (Shields et al., 2004; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). This study examined what two principals do in their leadership roles to eliminate deficit thinking, and it explored the challenges each faced.

Chapter IV

Addressing Marginalization

Deficit thinking is a lens in which the shortcomings of marginalized groups are primarily blamed on their cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic status. In education, academic shortcomings are often blamed on the student and his or her home life factors. This chapter seeks to discuss the role of the secondary school principal in addressing students who are marginalized by examining how two principals define deficit thinking, understand the impact of deficit thinking, strategize to eliminate deficit thinking, overcome the challenges, and recognize the impact of their efforts. This chapter provides an overview of the two cases: Leigh Anderson, Principal of Jackson Middle School, and Sam Ashford, Principal of Brook Hills High School. Table 1 provides an overview of each case. To ensure confidentiality, both the site and participants have been described using pseudonyms and in terms designed to not disclose personally identifiable information.

Table 1

Overview of Participants

Participant	Position	Site	Gender	Education experience
Leigh	Principal	Jackson Middle School	Female	12 years
Sam	Principal	Brook Hills High School	Male	16 years

The primary focus of this study was to examine the role principals play in eliminating deficit thinking. In order to do so, the data presented in the following pages address the following sub-questions:

1. How do secondary school principals define deficit thinking?
2. How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies do secondary school principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?

4. What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?
5. What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?

The data were gathered from a variety of sources. Utilizing direct quotes from participant interviews, observation summaries, and teacher survey results, the findings encapsulated each principal's efforts to eliminate deficit thinking and the practices that perpetuate it.

Both secondary schools are located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Since the purpose of this study is to examine how deficit thinking marginalizes some student groups, it is important that each building enrolls students that are considered a part of the dominant context and students that are considered a part of the marginalized context to better understand how deficit thinking impacts those not in the dominant content. The student population at each building represents a diverse student body, allowing for an informed study on deficit thinking. Table 2 and Table 3 provide an overview of the student demographics of each building.

Table 2

Overview of School Demographics

Site	Enrollment	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Multiracial	% LEP ^a	Low-income
Jackson MS	600	75	6	10	3	6	4	25%
Brook Hills HS	2,000	63	10	18	7	3	4	36%

^aLEP = Limited English Proficiency.

Table 3

Overview of School Profile

Site	Enrollment	Average class size	Attendance rate	Mobility rate	IEPP ^a	OEPP ^b
Jackson MS	600	20	95%	12%	\$4,800	\$8,700
Brook Hills HS	2,000	20	94%	8%	\$8,100	\$15,500

^aIEPP = Instructional Expenditure per Student.

^bOEPP = Operating Expenditures per Pupil.

Each case is presented individually as the findings pertain to the research questions. First, Leigh's background will be explored followed by a brief description of Jackson Middle School. Then, an exploration of Leigh's definition of deficit thinking will be examined followed by an analysis of the understanding of deficit thinking at Jackson Middle School. The strategies employed by Leigh to eliminate deficit thinking will be explored along with the challenges faced in overcoming deficit thinking. Finally, the perceived impact the strategies have on students will be discussed. The same format will be used in the analysis of Sam Ashford at Brook Hills High School.

Case 1: Leigh Anderson, Jackson Middle School

Five years ago, I couldn't even identify most of the marginalized students. Our principal so completely believes in giving every student the best education possible that I cannot even begin to think of not doing the same. (Anonymous teacher survey response)

The context of this quote is commonplace for Principal Leigh Anderson. As suggested in this study, dialogue regarding students who are marginalized at Jackson Middle School is an ongoing process. The ongoing conversations have heightened staff awareness of the marginalizing practices that exist specifically in her building.

Leigh began her career teaching English at the junior high and high school level for five years before taking on a role as a middle school assistant principal. After two years, she accepted

the role of principal at Jackson Middle School and has served as the principal since. She holds a masters' degree in educational administration, and she is working toward her doctorate in educational leadership. It is in her current context as a doctoral student that she has come to recognize the prevalence of the assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that are perpetuated in the education system and are the root cause of deficit thinking.

Leigh is a Caucasian female and considers herself to be from a "very small, all White, farming community" and "was a product of a White, privileged education." Leigh always wanted to be an educator, and although she "had a positive experience in junior and high school," the realities of the world did not open to her until she enrolled in college. In high school, "our teachers never talked about culture or different perspectives," she said. And even when she started teaching, she "didn't see the bigger picture about education." Not until she started her doctoral program and was exposed to various perspectives in the research on learning did she recognize that in order for her students to succeed in the education world, she needed to challenge her own mindset about student potential.

Leigh also takes the cause to eliminate deficit thinking quite personally. During one interview, she recognized that providing an equal and equitable education to every student, especially students who are marginalized, "is the most important thing a principal does," and this is accomplished by "providing critical feedback to teachers and making sure the best possible person is in the classroom." Leigh contends there is significant research indicating the teacher is the most important factor in a child's education. Therefore, it is important for her to address the concerns of staff members when they share things like "if the parents would only do this, or if the parents cared more, or if the parents were more involved," then the kids would learn.

It therefore becomes important for Leigh to hold conversations with staff regarding their excuses and to let them know that they have the potential to greatly impact students despite home life factors that create challenging circumstances. She often makes it personal for staff by consistently contending that “if it is not good enough for my child, then it is not good enough for any child.” This has become an even more passionate conviction for Leigh as she recently learned of her own child’s cognitive disability. “That makes it even more personal for me,” she shares. “I know I want every one of my child’s teachers giving him the very best; I do the same for every student at Jackson, and I expect it of every teacher.”

Leigh recognizes dialogue is of central importance in her role as principal. Keeping the lines of communication open with all stakeholders is critical to her daily success. A typical day for Leigh includes talking to parents the majority of the day about the academic or behavioral needs of her students. She also meets daily with team leaders, department chairs, and individual teachers. Leigh continually provides feedback to teachers after walkthroughs and classroom observations. Leigh is not hesitant to share, “dialogue is vital to the success of everyone.”

One of Leigh’s proudest communication channels is monthly student focus groups. Students are invited to come in and share with the leadership team what they are enjoying about Jackson and what they feel could be done to improve the school. During these meetings, Leigh gathers critical information about the school from the perspective of the students. These meetings are critical to Leigh as they inform the decision-making process.

The notion of dialogue emerged as a prevalent theme in this study on deficit thinking. It is the foundation from which marginalizing practices are addressed at Jackson Middle School.

School and Community Context

Jackson Middle School serves approximately 600 students in grades 5th-8th. Seventy-seven percent of the student body is White, 10% is Hispanic, 5% is Black, 3% is Asian, and 6% of the student body considers itself Multiracial. Jackson has about a 25% low income rate, and 3% of the students are limited English proficient. Students have a 95% attendance rate and an increasing mobility rate at close to 12%. Average class size is 20 students for each grade level.

Leigh describes the community as a “very solid, hardworking community that values and appreciates education” and the parent participation rate is consistently at 100% per school data reports. She points out that “historically, parents are extremely involved at the elementary level and then pull away when students get to the middle school, mainly because of their children not wanting them to be involved.” Leigh consistently makes it a part of her mission that “parents are partners in education, and we want them to be part of their children’s education.” Leigh finds that parents do want to be a part of that; they want to be involved and she actively finds ways for that to happen.

Leigh is also cognizant of the impact of the economy on the school culture. “Our families are seeing very similar things that other families are seeing in this economy. Either one or both parents are out of work, so that is impacting not only the community, but our children.” Despite the challenges the economy presents, Leigh takes pride in the fact that parents continue to be supportive of Jackson and are integral parts of the school leadership team.

The staff at Jackson Middle School is composed predominately of White teachers, with 1% black and 1% Hispanic according to school data reports. Approximately 70% of the staff is female. The average teacher experience of Jackson teachers is 12 years, while about half of the staff has obtained a Master’s Degree. All staff members are considered highly qualified. The

instructional expenditures per pupil are about \$4,800 while the operating expenditure per pupil is \$8,700.

Defining Deficit Thinking

Leigh was selected for this study through a purposeful sampling technique because of her reputation in the education world as a school leader who works to eliminate deficit thinking. This section addresses research question one: “How do secondary school principals define deficit thinking?” Her definition of deficit thinking will be explored in this section along with examples of deficit thinking she finds in her building.

Leigh shared,

Deficit thinking is a practice or process that educators and other stakeholders in the school community engage in to place blame on parents and students who are traditionally underserved in school communities. It often occurs as a result of educators placing blame for low test scores or poor performance on students from poverty or minority students because teachers believe that “these students” or “those parents” do not care about education. As a result, teachers marginalize underserved students and perpetuate the achievement gap.

Leigh believes that education is supposed to provide a level playing field, but she feels the reality is that “all of us come to the table with different experiences.” She finds that these differences are too often seen as deficits because the differences are not what many educators have come to understand as “normal” in the school context. “Everybody comes with different backgrounds, different experiences, and as teachers, I believe the reason that I feel like I’m so passionate about it is, my own child will come to the table with limited opportunities (based on his special needs) that I won’t be able to give to him. And I expect that he will be in a school system that will support that and take him to the next level, regardless of what he comes to the table with. So kids who are traditionally marginalized in schools are already at a disadvantage

because of those differences.” Leigh further purports that these differences lead to practices that result in unequal access and opportunities for students, ultimately resulting in marginalizing, self-fulfilling prophecies.

Leigh’s pursuit of eliminating deficit thinking is relative to two life experiences. First, through the pursuit of her doctorate in education, she has come to recognize the notion of deficit thinking. As she discusses, her education program has been pursued through the lens of social justice and the learning context is grounded in research and critical dialogue. That approach has helped her to understand the intricacies of providing an equitable education to every student, despite the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural differences of students. Second, her own child’s diagnosis has elevated her passion to eliminate deficit thinking. She now addresses every situation with students as if each student was her own. The newly constructed knowledge base and the personalization of her work intensify her desire to keep the focus of every student, especially the marginalized, as the core of her mission as principal.

Leigh is cognizant that educators often approach their responsibilities with an open mind, and some of the assumptions about students are not intended to marginalize them. When asked to discuss why deficit thinking exists in her building, Leigh shares that it is “what teachers know; it is just based on their experience.” Leigh recognizes it is not always intentional, but it also hurts a lot of our students in the meantime.” Despite why it exists, Leigh understands that it contributes to a limiting experience for students.

Leigh understands that deficit thinking is prevalent in every single school. She shares a vision of what every school can look like.

I think that it takes a lot to eliminate it. There are some really old school mentalities out there and not necessarily from veteran teachers. All schools should be a place where kids come to feel comfortable and safe. They should never want to leave. And we shouldn’t be

locking the doors on them because our contractual time has ended. I think we have a greater responsibility than that.

Leigh has come to recognize that almost everybody in education is in it for the right reason.

However, she thinks that looking at a bigger picture of education is very difficult for people to do.

Understanding Deficit Thinking

In order to understand the context of the study, it is important to gauge the extent to which deficit thinking exists at Jackson Middle School. This section entails the exploration of research question two: “How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?” A summary and analysis of the interviews and results from an anonymous teacher survey were used to gather this data. The first part explores how Leigh understands the prevalence of deficit thinking at Jackson Middle School. The second part explores the extent to which deficit thinking is prevalent based on an anonymous teacher survey.

Principal Perspective: Understanding Deficit Thinking

In her first couple of years as principal, Leigh would routinely hear things like “that’s too hard for those kids, and they’ll never be able to do that,” whenever she discussed new initiatives that would provide opportunity and access for students and create a more rigorous learning environment. As a result of these perceptions, Leigh recognized the trickle-down effect on student achievement.

“I would hear things like kids saying ‘I’m not going to be able to do that’ because they don’t believe that they can,” Leigh states. She identifies the school structure and misplaced teacher intentions as the biggest factors in the self-defeating attitudes. She also recognizes that blaming the teachers is not going to fix the problem. “And who will tell them [students] that they

can? The teacher.” Leigh is cognizant of the correlation between teacher’s attitudes toward students and the impact it has on student achievement. “I don’t think any staff member intentionally puts a constraint on students. I really don’t. I don’t have one teacher in this building that comes to work and says he is going to constrain students today and be a deficit thinker. I really don’t believe that, honestly. I think our structures limit the opportunities.” Leigh believes that the structures in place and the fear of losing what we are familiar with contribute more to deficit thinking than anyone truly believing someone cannot do something because of his or her socio-economic status, linguistic difference, or cultural identity.

Leigh recognized deficit thinking existed in her building on one of her first days, nearly six years ago. It first surfaced during conversations with parents and staff regarding the placement of students into grade level teams. It became even more apparent during discussions regarding the process of placing students in the foreign language program. These two scenarios quickly enlightened Leigh to the severity in which deficit thinking occurred in her building.

“The first phone call that I received as principal was from a parent begging me not to place her student on the yellow team because the yellow team students were considered the dumb kids,” Leigh recalls. That was the first red flag for Leigh because she knew if the stigma was out there then the students and staff were aware of it as well. The teams were grouped by the electives that students took to accommodate the schedule. Placement in the foreign language program was determined by grades, and the community was aware of it. As a result, students with higher grades were teamed together. Ultimately, students who opted not to take a foreign language program or did not qualify for the foreign language program were teamed together, by default, on the yellow team. “What was happening,” Leigh admits, “was that some parent didn’t

want their kids in classes with certain other kids.” Those other kids happened to be overwhelmingly from a low socio-economic status or were identified as a minority.

This led to the second issue—the foreign language program. After reading a three page, single-spaced letter from a parent asking Leigh to let her child into the foreign language program, Leigh recognized that the program was denying access to a large number of students because of an arbitrary pre-requisite. According to Leigh, the parent was “literally begging for her child to get into the foreign language program.” Upon investigation, Leigh determined that the foreign language teachers were sitting down with a list of students and determining whom they believed to be and who was not qualified enough to take foreign language in junior high school, based solely on their performance in English. “Basically, teachers determined if you had a good work ethic because you had straight A’s in English and therefore could take foreign language,” Leigh admits. “However, there’s no correlation between kids who do well in English and learning a foreign language.” As a result, teachers were setting the agenda and limiting the opportunities for kids based on their own stereotypes and assumptions of students.

Leigh further recognizes deficit thinking when it comes to the assumptions her staff makes regarding parental involvement. “I think the idea that parents don’t care is something that the staff and I continuously have conversations about,” Leigh states. She is cognizant of the changes that continue to reshape the education world, and the changes are holding educators more and more accountable. Leigh feels that:

Every year education is changing. Our kids change. The field of education is changing. But I find that some teachers have a difficult time changing. So because of that, we place blame on people. We blame the parents. We say the parents don’t care. The parents aren’t involved enough. And I turn that on them. I’m a busy parent. I have a lot going on. And that doesn’t mean that I don’t care.

Leigh continually personalizes the notion of the parents not caring by recognizing that as much as she cares about her child, she cannot always stay on top of his needs at school. She relies on the school structure to address those needs as well and provide him with the same access and opportunities that are afforded every student.

Staff Perspective: Understanding Deficit Thinking

This study included an anonymous teacher survey that gauged the extent to which deficit thinking exists at Jackson Middle School. As part of an anonymous staff survey, participants were asked an open-ended question regarding the academic failure of students. Respondents addressed the question: “Think of a child who is not succeeding in your class. Please list the reasons for this lack of success.”

Table 4

Teacher Survey Responses: Reasons Students Fail

Indicator	Responses	Percentage
Student lack of effort/motivation	7	15
Student lack of belief/ low self-esteem	5	11
Home life factors/Housing conditions	5	11
Student has a poor attitude	4	9
Student is afraid to ask questions	3	7
Student has emotional issues	3	7
Student has a language barrier	3	7
Lack of Parental support	3	7
Student has a reading deficiency	2	4
Student has a unique social situation	2	4
Student lacks skills	2	4
Economic situation	2	4
Problems outside of school	1	2
Student does not study	1	2
Class Size	1	2
Teacher’s Perceptions	1	2

According to the anonymous teacher survey at Jackson Middle School, there are a total of 45 written reasons as to why a student fails. According to Table 3, 32 comments refer to the student as the reason. Included in the comments (number of references in parenthesis): student lack of effort/motivation (7), student does not believe he can do it/ low self-esteem (5), student

has a poor attitude (4), student is afraid to ask questions (3), student has emotional issues (3), student has a language barrier (3), student has a reading deficiency (2), student has a unique social situation (2), students lacks skills (2), and student does not study (1).

Eleven of the comments list the parent/home factors. These include: home life, lack of parental support, economic situations, problems outside of school, and inadequate housing. Two comments identify the school or teachers as the reason. Class size and teachers' preconceptions are the responses.

Overwhelmingly, the staff associates academic failure with shortcomings of the student or his or her parental/home life factors. In essence, according to staff, the reason that students fail lies outside the realm of the school or the teacher. Consequently, accountability lies not with the school or staff, but it lies with perceived marginalizing life scenarios. This is consistent with Leigh's assertion that students and their home life factors or life experiences are accepted by staff as the reason for the poor academic performance of students who are marginalized.

Staff was also asked to rate the extent that they feel "the current educational structure is the same structure in which I attended and succeeded during my K-12 school experience." According to Table 4, nearly 90% of the respondents felt that the current structure has little to very little resemblance to the schools structure in which the teacher attended and succeeded. Nearly 80% of the respondents feel that the current structure affords every student the opportunity to succeed despite any differences in language, culture and socio-economic status, yet the same percentage also feels the educational structure needs to reinvent itself by incorporating the latest research on learning to address the shifts in student demographics.

Table 5

Teacher Survey Responses: Current Educational Structure

Question	Very much	Much	Little	Very little	<i>n</i>
The current educational structure is the same structure in which I attended and succeeded during my K-12 school experience.	0.0% (0)	11.1% (2)	61.1% (11)	27.8% (5)	18
Every student has the opportunity to succeed in the current educational structure despite any differences in language, culture, and socio-economic status.	22.2% (4)	55.6% (10)	22.2% (4)	0.0% (0)	18
The current educational structure needs to reinvent itself by incorporating the latest research on learning to address the shift in student demographics.	11.1% (2)	72.2% (13)	16.7% (3)	0.0% (0)	18

Most teachers feel that the educational structure is different than when they attended school, yet the majority blame students and families (Table 3) for the lack of academic success, not the school structure. Additionally, although the majority of teachers feel that students can still succeed in this structure despite the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural differences, they feel the current structure needs to change. There exists disconnect between how teachers understand academic achievement and the educational structure. In that disconnect may lie an explanation for the existence of deficit thinking.

Strategies and Challenges of Eliminating Deficit Thinking

Leigh feels that deficit thinking exists in schools because educators have allowed it to fester in the halls and classes for many decades. By allowing it to exist, educators have inadvertently allowed it to perpetuate. Consequently, when asked about the importance of addressing deficit thinking practices, Leigh shared that eliminating deficit thinking is the most important job for her as the principal. She firmly believes that “it’s a leader’s responsibility to

address it so that staff members see different perspectives and see the bigger picture of education instead of just the four walls of their classroom.” This section examines research questions three and four: “What strategies do secondary principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?” and “What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?” The data presented here are collected from case interviews, case observations, and an anonymous teacher survey.

As Table 5 suggests, deficit thinking at Jackson Middle School is addressed by several indicators. Leigh primarily works with stakeholders to overcome practices associated with deficit thinking in the area of dialogic relations. She also is committed to involving parents, providing access, addressing homework practices, and working with the most qualified teachers. Leigh finds that her efforts to eliminate deficit thinking are often met with challenges.

Table 6

Strategies to Eliminate Deficit Thinking at Jackson Middle School

Indicator	Stakeholder perspective	Context	Reason
Dialogic Relations	Staff Students Parents	Professional development Advisory Home connections	Address assumptions Validate concerns Build empathy
Parental Involvement	Parents E-mail list Open House forum Adult education	Leadership team Communicate vision Validate concerns technology, ELL	Overcome assumptions
Access	Students Tracking Parents	Foreign language More rigorous education School-based computer	Cultural exposure Empower w/ knowledge
Homework	Students	In-school opportunities	Address lived realities
Personnel	Teachers Staffing	Evaluations/Walkthroughs	Continuous improvement

She recognizes the biggest challenge in her pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking is overcoming the entrenched culture of a building where teachers really believe that they are doing what is in the best interest of kids. “No one comes to work and says ‘I’m going to do a bad job

today.’ I have great teachers, but I believe it’s my job to expose them to things that they haven’t seen.” Leigh is committed to changing the culture by exposing teachers to the lived realities of students that have different cultural experiences than staff members may have had as a student.

I want teachers to empathize with the student that walks into his house with a drug addict for a mother and no electricity, yet he comes to school. He walks to school, miles every single day, because they don’t have any transportation. His homework is done, he has never missed a day of school, and he is always on time. And the house is filthy. And it’s freezing. And I want teachers to know that that’s where our kids live and come from. And so I feel like it’s my job to do that.

In order to overcome this challenge, Leigh wants teachers to empathize with the lived realities of students at Jackson Middle School. She does not want students who are marginalized to get special attention or leniency because that in itself is perpetuating deficit thinking. As a strategy to eliminate deficit thinking, Leigh encourages teachers to be able to embrace and feel confident in their ability to discuss the lived realities of students and to make the conversations a part of their curricular vernacular without specifically naming students. “That is how we start to overcome deficit thinking as it is perceived by staff,” Leigh shares.

To achieve this, Leigh relentlessly pursues a cultural shift by engaging all stakeholders in dialogue, involving parents in the school, providing access to every student, revisiting the homework philosophy, and raising her expectations for personnel decisions. Each of these indicators presents their own challenges under the umbrella of eliminating deficit thinking.

Dialogue With Staff as Professional Development

More than anything else, Leigh continually and deliberately uses the notion of dialogue to help teachers build an understanding of deficit thinking, recognize it exists in the building, and then deconstruct the practices that marginalize students to create a culture that allows access and equity to every student. Included in the conversations is every stakeholder group. The intent of

the conversation varies from addressing assumptions of teachers to validating the lived experiences of students and parents.

Leigh utilizes her professional development opportunities as her primary platform to engage teachers in dialogue about deficit thinking. She believes every conversation she has with a teacher is a professional development opportunity. “We have constant dialogue at team meetings and at faculty meetings specifically about deficit thinking,” Leigh admits. She feels that every time she has an opportunity to speak with a teacher about his or her practice should be used in a way that develops trust and risk-taking. “There’s nothing better for me than to have a conversation with a teacher who gives me a different perspective on what we do and why we do it; ultimately, we have this exchange of different perspectives. That’s a really important piece.” As Leigh admits, the conversation is the most important piece in her pursuit of eliminating deficit thinking, recognizing that it takes ongoing and deliberate dialogue to even start thinking about eliminating it.

To help spur dialogue, Leigh shares relevant professional development articles with teams to read and to talk about in team meetings. One of her favorite topics she likes teachers to discuss in teams is classroom management. She feels it is an area in which teachers really limit the opportunities of students. Leigh uses the classroom management piece to help propel conversations regarding deficit thinking because she finds a connection between deficit thinking, stereotyped behaviors, and classroom management.

Leigh also uses multi-media avenues to entice teachers to engage in dialogue. At one meeting, she showed her staff a video about homeless kids because all of their kids don’t exist with the same resources. “Afterwards, I was asked by teachers to tell them who our homeless kids are.” Leigh recognizes that such questions are important and indicate that the teachers care,

but she feels the question is misguided. “I asked why they need to know. They responded that if they knew, they would be more lenient with homework. They would give them more.” Leigh appreciates the gesture, and she uses the moment to point out that every student should have those opportunities.

The notion of being lenient for the homeless students is a form of deficit thinking. In this case, it assumes that if a kid is homeless, he or she will not be able to do homework. If it is not homelessness, it might be something else.

And while I think teachers are very well intentioned, what I really wanted them to do was to go back into their classrooms and look at kids in a different way that, how can they really think about my science project or my math homework or my English paper when they’re dealing with these issues outside of school. And it’s not about putting an “H” on every homeless kid and letting them walk around our building. It’s more about we should have that same compassion for all of our kids. How do we provide equitable opportunities and access for every single child in the building to be able to stay after school if they want to? How do we give all of our kids access to transportation or breakfast in the morning or childcare for their parents so that their parents can come here and participate in their education? That’s the bigger thing. That’s where the conversations need to go—setting up every kid to succeed.

Leigh recognizes that when teachers better understand and develop trusting relationships with their students, they will be able to provide them with the resources each student needs to succeed on several levels. Essentially, Leigh believes that every student needs complete equity and access not only to resources and opportunities, but in the interventions and opportunities to succeed as afforded by teachers. “I think that’s a conversation that needs to keep happening,” Leigh affirms.

Leigh is cognizant of the fact that she is not an expert in the field of deficit thinking, but she does not stop her relentless pursuit to eliminate it. “I think it has to be ongoing professional development, an ongoing conversation.” To shore up her mission to eliminate deficit thinking, Leigh often relies on outside experts to offer additional insight. “I’ve brought in various people, such as university professors, to sit down with parents, teachers, and students to specifically

discuss and strategize about some of our marginalizing practices.” Leigh recognizes the conversation needs to be structured and sustained, and she is humble enough to recognize that she does not have all the answers.

Leigh is an adamant believer that her staff meetings and team meetings must be devoted to professional development opportunities that embrace dialogue about deficit thinking. “You have your entire faculty there. There is no reason to put an agenda with a list of dates and have the principal read it. It is, in my opinion, a huge waste of time.” Instead, Leigh uses the opportunities to engage in conversations on issue that are impacting education. “We’re at a critical time in education. Everybody knows that. And while some people might perceive that in a negative sense, I think it’s a really exciting time to be in education because we can make a huge difference.” Leigh believes that every piece of conversation can have a huge impact, and she knows that every individual does make a difference. The conversation has to be direct and purposeful if the elimination of deficit thinking is the target.

Professional development opportunities and the ensuing conversations for the purpose of capacity building are widely utilized by Leigh. She feels the more teachers read about deficit thinking, discuss where it exists, and strategize to address it, the more they become a resident expert on the topic.

Teachers are leaders. When they think of leadership, I don’t want them to think about me. I want them to think about themselves. I want there to be this inherent, wow, what can I do as a leader in my building to address the issues that limit our students’ abilities.

Building teacher leaders is a very important part of professional development for Leigh. She acknowledges that “small, incremental steps will make a larger difference in the end.” Building the capacity for leadership is another desired outcome of her commitment to creating dialogue through every professional development activity.

When it comes to conversation, Leigh believes it doesn't have to be an argument. She wants teachers to feel very open, and if they disagree, she wants them to hear differing perspectives to broaden their understanding. When it comes to deficit thinking, Leigh recognizes that challenging deficit thinking is challenging the experience and expertise of teachers, especially the most vested ones. "When we think about and talk deficit thinking, it challenges teachers in a way that they're uncomfortable with. It doesn't mean we shy away from it though because that has led to this problem." Leigh knows that teachers bring their own personal history and personal experiences to the table, and she recognizes that teachers believe that they are doing what they feel is in the best interest of kids. "And many times they absolutely are doing what they feel is best for students. They're not intentionally trying to be harmful, but anytime they are limiting the potential of students based on preconceptions and stereotypes, it is absolutely harming students."

During one of the observations at Jackson Middle School, Leigh demonstrated the commitment to dialogue through a professional development opportunity. Leigh held an early morning staff meeting in her building's media center. After spending a few moments reviewing procedures, the meeting shifted its focus on the topic of the day: *Understanding the Contextual Experiences of Students*. The presentation revolved around the principal's recent experience in an urban Midwestern school district. The premise of the meeting focused on the needs of students that "we as educators" sometimes overlook based on our own experiences that quite often differ from the experiences of "our students who are marginalized." These differences often "result in deficit thinking."

Leigh cited research from several sources, but most specifically from Anthony Muhammad's "Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division." She also

included pictures from her venture to help staff understand the lived experiences of students who are marginalized. The pictures showed decrepit homes with missing or boarded windows, yet students were walking out of them or in front of them with backpacks hanging off their shoulders. Another picture showed overgrown shrubs blocking classroom windows and hallways with missing ceiling tiles. Leigh asked staff to consider how the environment and the expectations of the teachers in these buildings might impact the learning of the students.

After some discussion, Leigh reiterated that she agreed it would be tough to overcome some of the “deficit thoughts” that these students and teachers bring to school every day. She then asked teachers to consider their own students. “Do you know how your students live, or do we make assumptions about them, positive or negative, that impact how you deal with them on a regular basis?” Leigh asked. After some pause, she invited staff to attend a home visit with her to gather a better understanding of who their students are so that “we can better meet their needs.”

“Too often, we expect students to meet our needs by fitting them into prescribed roles we set for them. Those that fit our prescribed roles do well here; they are not who I am concerned with. I am concerned with the many others that do not fit into those roles.” She invited staff to discuss in small groups what happens to those students and allowed for a few moments of table conversation.

During that time, Leigh walked around the room listening to conversations. Most conversations centered on the question. Comments recorded of teachers include, “well, their parents do the best they can, but it still doesn’t mean the kids are going to achieve at the same level.” Another comment overheard was, “What am I supposed to do? I can’t stop my lesson every time a kid is struggling. That is not fair to the other kids either.” Another notable quote, “This is all just another initiative. The reality is we’ll go back to our rooms and do the best we

can with these types of kids. They're not Sun Valley students." Sun Valley is a nearby community known for its affluence, high marks on the state assessments, and highly competitive athletic teams. After five minutes, Leigh called the group together to share some of the responses. The comments reiterated the same ones heard during the small group discussion.

Leigh introduced a fellow administrator who spoke to the staff regarding the unintentional messages educators can sometimes send to students, specifically students who are marginalized, based on the contextual experience of educators. Leigh's presentation continued with a video clip of Dr. Pedro Noguera that focused on the notion that schools are the answer to the issues that marginalize students groups. Specifically, he insists that schools need to reinvent what they deliver to students based on their needs and not the needs of the teachers. That, he suggests, is how schools are going to be transformed.

Between segments, Leigh afforded each table opportunities to discuss the main points of each segment. Tables responded accordingly, again with sentiments that blamed the student or family for the shortcomings of student achievement and feelings of helplessness, but they did share a desire to be able to do something to address the issues. Leigh shared afterwards that progress is being made, indicating there was a time when teachers wouldn't have given a second thought to the needs of students who are marginalized. "We are at the point now where we can start having the honest discussions," Leigh confirmed.

As Leigh suggested during our interviews, she dedicated the majority of the staff meeting to dialogue rather than reviewing protocols that can be shared via e-mail. More specifically, the dialogue is deliberately focused on the notion of deficit thinking and addressing the needs of students who are marginalized at Jackson Middle School. Additionally, Leigh reiterated the possibility of staff members joining her on home visits. She does not force it upon anyone, but

models the importance of home visits to build trusting relationships with parents who have traditionally been alienated by schools because of linguistic differences, non-traditional work schedules, or feelings of alienation by school structures. Her message to challenge deficit thinking is structured and sustained.

Leigh recognizes that she is not going to change the mindset of every teacher in one conversation. Eliminating deficit thinking is a process of deliberate dialogue for Leigh. Eliminating deficit thinking and the practices that marginalize students takes time, but each critical conversation chips away at the established structure and creates space for an emerging culture with small but successive changes that promote equity and opportunity.

Dialogue With Students through Advisory Period

Leigh recognizes the importance of addressing deficit thinking whether it exists in conversations, curriculum or textbooks. She knows it is her responsibility and that of her staff to address deficit thinking in all contexts. As a result of ongoing conversations with students, Leigh has come to recognize the importance of interacting with students on a regular basis to help eliminate deficit thinking. To provide a structured and sustained discussion platform for students, the school's advisory program has undergone revision to provide opportunities for dialogue regarding marginalizing practices rather than the traditional conveying of information. Advisory is professional development for students.

Early in her tenure as principal, several students came to Leigh to discuss students who were acting in a racist manner. "I had a student say, did you know that I'm Arabic? I said yes. The student asked what I do about kids that are racist. I asked why? Has someone made racist comments to you? The student responded yes," recalls Leigh. According to the student, other students referred to her as a terrorist and suicide bomber. Leigh was alarmed by the student's

comments, and admits she was appalled when the Arabic student indicated, “I can’t really tell you who it is, because it happens to me every day.” It was a heartbreaking moment for Leigh, but one she knew the staff needed to hear.

When Leigh addressed the staff with this story, most were hesitant to believe that such rampant behavior existed at Jackson Middle School. Leigh challenged the staff to bring the concern back to their students and just talk about the situation to see what they could find. “Every single teacher came back and said that it’s rampant in the building,” Leigh admits. That was several years ago. Although she admits it is still happening, it is more reduced than in the past. It became her platform for restructuring the advisory program.

Advisory used to be about kids coming into a room they shared with teachers and occasionally talk about the grading term, specific procedures, or a memo from the principal. There was very little time spent on meaningful interactions. It has since become a haven designed to specifically address issues that deal with students’ lives. “We host a scenario-based conversation every Friday. Advisory is now about dialogue. It’s about understanding. It’s about getting to the root of why these issues are happening,” Leigh proudly declares.

Advisory is no longer a holding period as it is in many schools. Leigh recognized the need to include dialogue in the everyday life of students so that an informed adult can provide insight on the social and emotional issues they deal with on a regular basis. Without the structured time to discuss students’ lived experiences, the misguided, hurtful and marginalizing comments would fester unnoticeably in the halls and lead to further division amongst students and along cultural identities. Advisory conversations build understanding to positively impact the climate and address traditionally pathologized issues.

Additionally, Leigh's office has an open door policy for students that have concerns regarding the climate of the building. Her secretaries know that if a student comes to speak with Leigh regarding a pertinent issue, the student's needs take precedent over anything else that's going on. "I am adamant about students coming to me whenever he or she feels alienated or has a concern for another student. I do not want any student to feel invalidated because of who he or she is," Leigh states. Students are afforded several opportunities to express themselves at Jackson Middle School. They know they have adults throughout the building they can speak to, and they know there is a structure in place for them to have these conversations in advisory. They know that they can write Leigh a letter or that they can come in and talk to her at any time. "And that's the way that it should be," Leigh adamantly shares.

Dialogue With Parents through Home Connections

Eliminating deficit thinking takes the efforts of every stakeholder. Additionally, the voices of every stakeholder must also have an opportunity to be heard. Although there is some parental involvement in the school, there existed a void where the parental community did not get a voice. To address this void, Leigh has partnered with the school personnel, specifically pupil services, to make home visits to parents that have not taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by Jackson Middle School. The intent of the home visits was to provide feedback to and heighten the voice of parents from marginalized groups.

"The home visits have enlightened us as to why some parents do not take advantage of our parent opportunities," Leigh shares. According to Leigh, she felt an urge to make a home visit after speaking to a parent regarding the academic concerns of one of her students. When Leigh invited the parent to meet with her and a teacher to address the needs of her student, the parent denied the invitation. Upon further prompting, Leigh recognized that the parent was

apprehensive about coming to the school. “I felt I needed to connect to this parent so I asked if I could visit them at home.” Obviously surprised by the suggestion, the parent agreed to the home visit.

During the home visit, Leigh was welcomed by the family with a full Mexican-style dinner. She was also surprised by the greeting she received from the entire family. After they ate, Leigh opened the conversation about the student. After some conversation, the mother admitted that she took the night off of work for her daughter, but would not be compensated for it. “The mother shared that she knew it was more important to meet about her daughter’s education than losing one night of wages. That hurt me, deeply,” Leigh admitted. Leigh learned through the visit that the mother does indeed care about her daughter’s education, but due to her limited English and work schedule, she cannot participate in the parent functions at Jackson Middle School. “What really concerned the mother,” according to Leigh, “is the stress her daughter goes through regularly because she is responsible for the care of her two younger siblings after school when the mother goes to work.” It was at that moment Leigh realized how biased the educational practices are in schools. “The system works for our traditional, English speaking families whose parents work traditional nine o’clock to five o’clock jobs.” The system creates hurdles for everyone else.

As part of the efforts to eliminate deficit thinking, home visits occur throughout the year.

We do home visits to families and engage them, because we find that if parents aren’t coming into the building, it’s because of an experience that they’ve had. It’s not because they don’t necessarily want to be a part of their children’s education or sometimes it’s a language barrier or sometimes it’s because they work three jobs. It’s not because they don’t care. The more I can walk in their shoes, the more I am equipped to help teachers walk in their shoes.

Leigh adamantly believes that the home visits are the most beneficial source of knowledge as she continues to work on ways to eliminate deficit thinking.

The final dialogue piece is intended to remove Leigh from the process and empower teachers to take a lead role in addressing the communication gaps and knowledge gaps of the community in which they serve. In order to accomplish this, Leigh requires teachers to regularly call students' homes. In order for this initiative to come to fruition, she had to address teacher concerns that they "don't have enough time" or "don't want to bother the parent." Leigh reminds staff that in all her years of education, she has yet "to talk to a parent who has said, I can't believe you're calling me because you're concerned about my kid." In order to make this requirement a success, she takes the time to model the process for interested teachers.

Leigh believes in setting up teachers to succeed by modeling phone conversations with parents. Leigh shares,

We'll sit in a conference room and I will call the parent, introduce myself, indicate I have them on speaker phone, and ask if they have a few seconds. And I will model a conversation that I expect my teachers to have with our parents.

Leigh agrees that time does play somewhat of a factor, but she feels that teachers are hesitant to make that call because they're afraid of the backlash. Leigh finds that

if you go in with the right attitude and you call them right away and say, "I'm looking for your help with this because you know your child the best, and I want to partner with you," you're not going to get the backlash.

Leigh reminds her staff that backlash comes when teachers make reactive phone calls in situations where there is little hope for the student. Leigh strongly feels that approach is unacceptable as an administrator, as a teacher, and as a parent. Her goal is to continue to build relationships with parents through proactive dialogue.

Challenges to Dialogic Relationships

The biggest challenge to fostering dialogic relationships is the apprehension teachers have about discussing pathologized topics with students including homelessness, poverty, limited

English, cultural differences and other factors that are realities for students Dialogue itself is not an obstacle. The challenge is getting staff to engage in dialogues that have not been addressed in the past, but the topics are realities for many students.

“I find that teachers say they are uncomfortable having that conversation. I’m uncomfortable having that conversation about homelessness. I’m uncomfortable having the conversation about racist comments or homosexuality.” Teachers get worried about what parents are going to think, and Leigh assures them that parents are very open. Parents have many opportunities to share concerns with staff regarding the conversations with students, “and I have yet had a parent pull a student at Jackson because he or she didn’t like the conversations we are having about sensitive topics.” Leigh continually reminds staff members that if they want to continue to build trusting relationships with students, they have to discuss the topics that are important to them. “You cannot have one without the other,” Leigh reminds them.

Leigh encourages staff to invite her into situations where she can model and facilitate a conversation for them. Providing support and encouragement to staff regarding difficult conversations is critical to overcoming the dialogic challenges related to eliminating deficit thinking.

Increasing Parental Involvement

Leigh recognizes that she puts a lot of stock in building relationships with parents, but it is critical in her efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. She admits she is often critiqued for affording parents too much stake in the decisions made at Jackson Middle School. Leigh understands the concerns of the staff, but she does not deviate from her goal to close the gap between the home and the school. “I find it ironic that teachers will complain that parents do not care and that is why the students struggle, but when I do get parents involved in school, I am

critiqued that they are too involved.” Leigh recognizes that it is often hard to please everyone, and she has determined that she and the staff at Jackson serve the parents, students, and community, “but I will support the staff any way I can so they can meet the needs of our stakeholders.” Parental involvement is instrumental in the pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking.

Open House is the biggest venue for parents. Leigh uses the forum to gauge and solicit parent interest in various activities throughout the year. Included in the evening format are parent volunteer forms that allow parents to volunteer to assist at the school. “I am proud of what our staff does here, and I want the parents to see it for themselves.” Additionally, Jackson Middle School sponsors a Career Day and Open House serves as the platform for soliciting participants.

Since Open house is the most attended event, Leigh uses it to gather critical data. “We put up Post-It notes and large boards all around the gym so that they can give us anonymous feedback on what we do well, what we could improve upon, and what they would like to see,” Leigh describes. “We also ask them specific questions on everything from transportation and operations and procedures from drop off and pickup to curriculum and programs and after school opportunities.” The approach allows her to gather essential data from parents to drive the decision-making process and guide the school leadership team.

“Our leadership team looks at that data,” Leigh confirms. “Our school improvement plan is driven by what parents and students tell us.” The approach allows the leadership team to share their thoughts on the data from various perspectives, but more importantly, it allows them to discuss ways to improve Jackson Middle school from each perspective. No longer are the decisions made strictly by the administration. They are made by every stakeholder involved in the process. It is not an easy task by any means. “The conversations can get heated, but that is okay because we are all in it for the betterment of our students,” Leigh confides.

Additionally, Leigh has a parent email list with several hundreds of parent emails. After accepting the fact that not every document intended for parents finds its way home, Leigh decided to give the electronic route a try. To address the concerns of parents without e-mail or internet access, Leigh decided to put a computer in the main office that's used by parents who don't have computer access at home. Furthermore, the school offers adult education opportunities in reading and technology to help shore up any obstacles that might exclude any parent from being a part of Jackson Middle School's education process.

During one of my school visits, I observed Leigh conduct a leadership team meeting. Teachers, support staff, and parents were present at the meeting, but the focus was on the parents. The agenda was collaboratively assembled; items were delegated to specific stakeholders of each represented group. Agenda items centered on specific concerns of marginalized groups and addressed strategies the principal claims to employ in eliminating deficit thinking. The items included: an update on concerns about cultural/racial comments at school, article discussion (addressing the poor performance of Hispanic boys), engaging parents with school, making home visits, and redefining School Leadership Team (SLT) for next year. The conversation regarding the last item of the SLT included terms such as "critical dialogue" and "providing access" to some of the parents of marginalized student groups.

During this observation, it became evident that Leigh deliberately leads staff and parents on issues relating to deficit thinking. She clearly demonstrated a commitment to eliminate some of the practices associated with deficit thinking for the betterment of every student. As evident in both observations, she relied on every stakeholder group, especially parents, to foster an environment that truly provides an equitable education to every student.

Challenges to Increasing Parental Involvement

Leigh’s approach to parental and student involvement is noted by her staff. As part of this research, an anonymous teacher survey was administered to staff. According to the survey results in Table 6, nearly 80% of staff “Very Much” agrees that Leigh fosters positive relationship with parents, while only 61% “Very Much” feel that Leigh fosters positive relationship with students and 44% “Very Much” feel that Leigh fosters positive relationship with staff. Additionally, conversations with staff and students regarding students who are marginalized are taking place regularly. It is this recognition and support of her staff that allows conversations regarding deficit thinking to continually move forward.

Table 7

Survey Response

Question	Very much	Much	Little	Very little	<i>n</i>
To what extent do you think your principal:					
Fosters positive relationships with students.	61.1% (11)	33.3% (6)	5.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	18
Fosters positive relationships with parents.	77.8% (14)	16.7% (3)	5.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	18
Fosters positive relationships with staff.	44.4% (8)	44.4% (8)	11.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	18
Engages stakeholders in conversations regarding marginalized students.	55.6% (10)	38.9% (7)	5.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	18
Empowers stakeholders to take leadership roles in the learning of all students, especially the marginalized.	55.6% (10)	38.9% (7)	5.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	18
Keeps the learning of every student as the focus of his or her mission.	66.7% (12)	33.3% (6)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	18

Note. “Marginalized” refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

Parental involvement is an integral strategy in the efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. As Leigh continues to involve parents in the daily operations of the school, the initiative is met with

some resistance and misunderstanding. Regardless, Leigh finds value in what parents bring to the table in the decision making process.

I was at a team meeting last year where a teacher got extremely upset and said, you just don't understand what it's like. And I said, I do understand. And she said, no you don't. And I said, well, what do you mean then? And she said, I just feel like you always give the parents the easy way out. And you know, I reflected on that.

Leigh is comfortable with such comments because she believes that educators work for the parents and students as public educators. She believes she has an incredible responsibility, and it is her job to put the building in the hands of the community. Leigh realizes that such comments are a result of learning to open the environment to outside stakeholders as opposed to the traditional culture of the teacher having full control of what he or she did on a daily basis.

“Control,” Leigh shares, “is our biggest obstacle in anything we do.” Sharing decisions with other stakeholders is a challenge to overcoming deficit thinking, but it is a battle in which the process can not deviate.

Access to Rigor

At the student level, Leigh believes there is nothing more important in overcoming deficit thinking than providing opportunities for students to have access to all of the programs available. At Jackson, Leigh has taken a hard stance on opening the traditional honors level classes to all students, and she has restructured the policy to afford every student the opportunity to gain culturally enriching knowledge that the fine arts program offers. Leigh has worked to break down the barriers that prevent students from gaining the access and exposure to a rigorous and meaningful curriculum.

Recognizing the achievement gap between White and minority students is a practice Leigh takes to heart, and she realizes that the gap is in large part a result of the limited access to rigorous courses for some student groups. “I think looking at the number of marginalized kids

who are in our advanced placement programs has been something that we've done to address some of our marginalizing practices," Leigh shares.

Our Caucasian students perform better than our Hispanic students. Why is that? That shouldn't be the case. And when we have conversations about it, we'll hear things like "well those families maybe don't care as much," or "those families have so much going on." Well, that might be the case, but what are we doing differently to support kids?

Leigh firmly believes that every student—regardless of a disability, linguistic difference, cultural difference or socioeconomic status—should be exposed to a high quality curriculum.

One of Leigh's goals is to put every student in an advanced course of study in an effort to erase the assumptions that come with labels, and to provide each student with a more rigorous education. Leigh feels that students in lower track classes take a double hit. "For one, they are limited in the rigor and scope of the curriculum; two, they are inadvertently held to lower expectations whether the teachers intends to or not. The lowered expectations are a reality." As educators, Leigh describes that such notions are taken lightly at any given grade level, but over the course of twelve years of education, that creates a significant gap in learning, achievement and self-esteem. "And so I think the tracking has to eliminated it all together," Leigh shares. She recognizes such a notion is highly frowned upon by many educators, but also realizes that status quo is not the answer either. If provided with the individual resources and support, Leigh feels every student can succeed. Overcoming deficit thinking is part conversation to build understanding, and part action that challenges status quo practices spurned by deficit thinking.

Leigh believes it is her responsibility to make sure students get the access they deserve. "I think middle school provides the most opportunities for students to access all of the academic programs and activities in which students want to participate." She agrees there is much resistance to it, and students are not going to magically fare better; despite grades, she also knows it is about the opportunity and learning.

In order to address concerns with student failures due to a lack of preparedness, Leigh shares, “Well, I think it would look like advanced courses for all with additional supports. If you look at every single student individually, every student has strengths and weaknesses. So for me, all kids can receive high quality, rigorous instruction with additional supports.” The supports include scheduled interventions based on continuous formative assessments during the day while the student continues to move forward in the curriculum with the rest of the class. When a student is getting that intervention, he or she is not going to be penalized after the fact because the student has an opportunity to retake assessments to demonstrate a mastery of learning. Leigh is adamant about providing the support for students as part of the process of raising their academic knowledge base. This approach reinforces the notion of providing students with access to a more rigorous curriculum reinforced with the ability to succeed.

Leigh is very confident in the integrity of her fine arts programs at Jackson now that more students have the opportunity to take such classes. “We have a fine arts program and a music program in this building that I would put up against any high school if you really want to know the truth. We have a wide range of opportunities for kids, and every student needs a chance to build their cultural capital.” For Leigh, the process began by breaking down the school-imposed barriers that prevented students from accessing the fine arts program. Now, every student has the opportunity to take any culturally enriching program offered in the fine arts program.

The work continues for Leigh, but the results of her efforts are seen throughout the building. Classes are more mixed with students of traditionally marginalized groups than they have been in the past. The integrity of the advanced programs has not suffered, and the elective courses are flourishing. Students at Jackson Middle School have greater access to rigorous coursework and culturally enriching electives, but that is only half the battle. Although students

are provided greater access, there still exists the obstacle of getting staff members to overcome the notion that some students are incompetent because of various social and home life factors. Leigh continues to work with staff to ensure that all students, especially those who are marginalized, can succeed at increased levels of rigor.

Challenges to Providing Access to Rigor

Providing access is an essential strategy in overcoming some of the deficit thinking practices that have marginalized students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds and those from families of low socio-economic status. A challenge to providing access to a culturally enriching environment is helping teachers feel empowered to introduce topics that have traditionally been left out of the dominant conversation. This is in large part a result of the teacher's comfort level with an unfamiliar topic even though many students can speak to the topic firsthand because it is part of his or her contextual background.

Leigh presented an example of a teacher that had come to her to talk about wanting to read a book in her class, but was concerned because it dealt with homeless kids. "She was nervous about the conversations it would bring, but I told her those are the conversation that we want to be happening." Leigh feels it was a good exchange because the teacher was looking at what she was teaching in a different way, and that is exactly what she wants to happen. "As long as I provide support for my teachers in an effort to stop pathologizing the realities of some of our students, we will overcome these challenges."

Changing the process of how students enroll in courses proved to be a challenge for Leigh. Although every student is entitled to take an enriching course of study complemented by foreign language, the road to such access was not easy. "It was a major battle for me the first two years to get this place to a point where we could have open dialogue about what kids should be

exposed to in their education. That was the first battle, and we've completely turned those things around which I'm proud of." Before the dialogue, only 30-40 kids were enrolled in a foreign language, yet there were over 200 students in the grade. Now, each of those 200 students has the opportunity to take the class, and Leigh feels "there is no specific increase in the number of failing students. The negative comments from staff have subsided." Leigh and a majority of the staff have found common ground to increase the rigor of the curriculum. They continue to address their own assumptions about the abilities of students, and they continue to work to provide interventions to help each succeed.

Revisiting Homework Practices

Leigh shared that homework has long been a component of learning that is often debated. One argument against homework is that it is an assessment of a student's behavior or an assessment of a student's level of parental involvement. Another argument against homework is that it should only be used as a non-graded assessment because if a student can do it, he or she did not really need to complete it in the first place. If a student cannot complete it on his or her own, then it was just setting the student up for failure. Although Leigh is not opposed to homework because she does see value and relevance in meaningful assignments, she does recognize that homework sometimes sets up a student to fail.

Leigh feels that if a student is not able to complete the homework at home due to a lack of understanding and a parent is not available to assist, then the student will not successfully complete the assignment and will be penalized accordingly. "In essence, we are failing the student because of a lack of support at home," Leigh shares. Leigh encourages teachers to use homework as a non-graded, formative assessment to see how well students are learning; she is working to help staff understand that homework should not be a summative assessment because

the learning and assessing should not be taking place at home, but in the classroom. Homework should be used to bridge content from one day to the next to help the teacher decide what needs to be reviewed each day before moving forward in the curriculum.

I think that there is relevance in some homework. I'm not doubting that or denying that fact. But what I do think is, some of our kids go home and they take care of their siblings. They can't stay after school. They'd like to, but they can't because their parents are working, so they then become the caregiver. So they have to go home and help their kindergarten sister or their first grade brother gets off the bus, make sure that they're safe. And they're making dinner. They're cleaning the house. They're getting things ready. Some of our kids are acting in an adult manner, and we're expecting them to do five hours of homework a night. It's just unrealistic. But then when they are here, I believe we should be maximizing every single opportunity.

As an example, Leigh asks staff to rethink providing themselves with opportunities to grade papers during instructional time by showing a full-length movie or doing irrelevant work. In order to maximize student learning, she feels those practices should not be in place. "It's our job to take that out of the mix so that they have the opportunity to complete what they need to in school so they can provide the support their family needs at home," Leigh passionately states. Recognizing that homework often conflicts with home responsibilities, Leigh stresses that they will provide students with whatever they need during the day or have them come to school early or whatever so that students can balance reality with school.

Challenges With Revisiting Homework Practices

Homework is too often relied upon as a weighted assessment tool. Although staff is coming to understand how homework can be seen as a measure of behavior more than learning, Leigh still struggles with teachers who continue to use homework as a heavily weighted grade. Leigh hosts discussions regarding the number of students who fail classes because of poor homework performance, and works to help teachers recognize that there are a number of students that fail homework assignments, but still get passing grades on assessments.

Leigh recognizes that the conversation regarding assessments and what is being taught needs to be addressed, but they are not at that point yet. “We will get there,” admits Leigh, “but now is about getting them to understand that homework is working against many of our students more than it is helping them learn.” Once staff understands and is willing to consider other philosophies, the academic outcome for marginalized will proper as their education will emphasize skill acquisition during the school day and de-emphasize arbitrary homework completion.

Critical Conversations With Personnel

To address the roots of deficit thinking, Leigh uses critical conversations with staff on matters that she finds contribute to the marginalization of students. “I think one of the most important things that administrators do is provide critical feedback to staff and put the best possible person in the classroom,” Leigh adamantly shares. Therefore, Leigh puts a high priority on the evaluation process and the hiring of new staff as part of her effort to continually address deficit thinking at Jackson Middle School.

As part of the evaluation process, the administration at Jackson talks about the conversations teachers are having with kids. “When I do walkthroughs, I’m looking for how much time the teacher is talking versus the students talking. What types of relationships have been built? How are we engaging students within the classroom?” Leigh feels that the post observation conversation with honest feedback is a really critical piece. She feels it is essential to provide feedback and lead teachers to reflect on their own actions in the classroom, especially those that they may not even recognize as deficit thinking. For example, she may point out a seating chart that places certain students in more remote locations throughout the room, address how students were or were not able to connect to the topic based on their contextual experiences,

and ask how the material was relevant to all the students. There is an obvious refute of such marginalizing practices on behalf of the instructor, but as Leigh shares the data, staff members start to consider that maybe they do inadvertently marginalize some students. She admits the tension of such conversations was at first difficult, but keeping the focus on the needs of the child has helped ease the tension.

She knows that a lot of administrators want to look the other way and avoid difficult conversations, but she knows it is not the right thing to do.

Teaching is a very difficult art and science. It's a very difficult job. It's probably the most difficult job. At the same time, as an administrator, I think I have a responsibility to know that—I want every single kid in my building to be treated and educated the way that I would want my own son to be treated and educated. And that is the bar that I hold for all of the teachers. And I'm crystal clear with them.

Leigh continues to personalize the learning experience for teachers by getting them to walk in the shoes of their students. She also models that approach by personalizing the role of education as a parent. Leigh continues to relate to every student as if he or she were her own, and because of that she is able to continually put the learning experience of every student before everything else. It makes the difficult conversations easier and more meaningful for Leigh.

When it comes to hiring staff members, Leigh takes just as critical an approach. “I listen for candidates to be inclusive during interviews. I listen for them to be open and flexible. I give them scenarios and ask them to respond. Schools, Jackson especially, are very unique places to work because we have an inclusive philosophy, but not everyone has that philosophy.” Leigh realizes that everyone brings something very unique to the table, but the reality is “you can interview one way and be very different when you actually get into the classroom.” Leigh also listens for them to talk about their flexibility, to talk to me about how they engage parents, to talk about taking risks, and is willing to think outside of a traditional model of education.

I think that sometimes we get trapped in thinking this is what education is, when there's a whole world out there. I listen for bigger issues like child poverty and how that impacts us as educators or getting involved within our larger community. The school should be the hub of the community so I listen for teachers talking about how they want to engage the outside community and bring it within our school. That it's not just about their content. It's about putting equitable practices in place to support their content. I think there needs to be a blend, and a lot of times we either have one or the other. We need them both.

Leigh places a high value on the importance of the right personnel working with students on a regular basis. She recognizes that the relationships built between the teacher and the student is potentially stronger than any relationship she will be able to build with students because of the nature of a teacher's role. Therefore, she stresses the importance of working closely with teachers to provide ongoing and continuous support complete with critical feedback and reflection. Additionally, she looks beyond the content knowledge of potential hires to gauge their ability to see the big picture of education—providing equity and access to each and every student. Leigh recognizes she may never know the impact it is having on every child, but she admits it is her intent to continue to improve the quality of life for each student.

Challenges to Critical Conversations With Personnel

The classroom teacher has the most influence on a student every school day. Making sure the influence is positive and does not perpetuate deficit thinking is the responsibility of the principal. Leigh realizes that her approach to evaluations is daunting for some staff because she is essentially evaluating their passion as educators.

In an effort to eliminate deficit thinking, removing ineffective staff members is part of the process. Leigh insists that she has enjoyed and respected everyone she has ever worked with, but that does not mean every person is the best person for the students at Jackson Middle School. Her honest and critical feedback often pins her against the union, but she does not waver.

Every teacher is different just like every student is different. One of the things I love about the job is that you have to work with all of these different people and bring their strengths to the table to get them to see their weaknesses as well. Everybody has weaknesses; I have weaknesses, too. It is that simple. If you cannot overcome your weaknesses here, then this is not the best place for you because it impacts our students.

During the evaluation conferences, Leigh is open to hearing what teachers have to say, and she expects them to hear what she has to say. “And then let’s argue it out,” Leigh shares. She finds that intense dialogue used to be viewed as confrontational. She feels professional, informed argument is now a respected practice. She admits she is not always right; it comes down to looking at what is in the best interest of students. Some teachers have been much more reflective than others and they understand what Leigh is trying to do at Jackson. “That has come through our commitment to challenge classroom practices, status quo, and critical feedback.”

Personnel matters are very sensitive. In challenging deficit thinking, it is an important part of the process because of the influence of the classroom teacher on students. Removing the self from the situation is critical in making the most effective personnel matters that help eliminate a culture of deficit thinking.

Impact of Working to Eliminate Deficit Thinking

Leigh feels that the impact of her commitment to eliminate deficit thinking is most noted in the professional dialogue at Jackson Middle School. This section addresses research question five: “What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?”

Significance of Dialogue

Leigh shares that dialogue has the most significant impact on the elimination of deficit thinking. Dialogue provides validating opportunities for teachers, parents, and students. She proudly shares her take on the critical role dialogue plays at Jackson Middle School.

I think it's a lot of dialogue about building trust and letting teachers know that it's okay that if a student comes into your classroom and brings up an issue that's going on at home. You can open up that conversation and allow that to happen instead of cramming the content down their throat. I think that's a really important piece, and teachers need to know that they are the leaders in the building. They need to be leaders because I might not always be here, and this building will still be here with kids. The focus needs to be clear and consistent and it shouldn't be dependent on me. It should be dependent on them because it's a culture and climate philosophy that we've built, we respect, and we understand in every facet of what we do.

The quote reflects a vision of doing what is best for students, and that includes taking individuals out of the equation. According to Table 6, staff members recognize Leigh's commitment to empower every stakeholder to take a leadership role when it comes to the education of students, especially those who are marginalized.

Changing Practices

Some staff at Jackson Middle School also recognize the changes they have made in their practices that now afford every student the same equity, access, and opportunities than they did just three years ago. According to the anonymous teacher survey, open-ended responses overwhelmingly note the change in their practices. "Have you noticed a change in the way you address the learning needs of every student, especially the marginalized, in the past five years? Please explain." Example response include being able to make accommodations for students, empathizing with students' life challenges, addressing the whole student, utilizing differences to enrich learning environment, being able to meet students and not push them away for their differences. These responses indicate that change is occurring at Jackson Middle School in the mindset of teachers about the abilities of students who have traditionally been marginalized.

Increased Access

Additionally, indicators that the strategies to eliminate deficit thinking are taking root include the increased enrollment of minority students in the gifted and elective courses, a 20%

increase in the number of students passing the state exam, and an observable increase in the number of parents getting involved in the school. To Leigh, the true indicators are what she sees occurring more regularly.

If you observe team meetings, you will hear people challenging deficit thinking in a different way and asking each other questions to be more reflective. And I think that's important because it really is about teaching ourselves and our children to have a voice so no one feels marginalized.

Case #1: Conclusion

As suggested by the data, deficit thinking is relentlessly addressed to make every stakeholder aware of the real and perceived issues at Jackson Middle School. Dialogue is at the forefront of the efforts to change the deficit thinking practices that marginalize students. The approach is supported by a consistent pursuit to get parents involved in the school, provide student access to a more rigorous and enriching education, challenge philosophical positions on homework, and train the staff through a lens for social justice. Deficit thinking is ingrained in school structures and challenging these embedded thoughts and practices is difficult, but Leigh demonstrated an ability to successfully and purposely work to eliminate facets of deficit thinking that perpetuate the marginalization of some students.

Leigh is cognizant of the challenges, especially when her efforts are essentially challenging status quo. Even more so, she understands that working to eliminate deficit thinking is to challenge the accepted practices and beliefs of educators that were common and accepted practices during their formal education as well as during their experience as an educator.

Leigh believes that overcoming deficit thinking is an approach that moves beyond teaching to a test; however, she recognizes that test is often perceived as a primary reflection on educators. Leigh recognizes that teachers are stressed because of state and federal mandates with

NCLB and standardized testing as they are supposed to educate the whole child. “I constantly hear teachers talking about the state test, but it is only one part of what we do,” Leigh confirms. Leigh recognizes standardized tests are an indicator of how well her school is doing, but she thinks it is a very low bar. Leigh works closely with staff to help them overcome the focus on standardized tests. “I believe that if teachers were more focused on access and opportunity and came to the table thinking all kids can achieve at a high level, then we will get there. The tests will take care of themselves.” A culture that is rid of deficit thinking educates the whole child. It provides a curriculum that is essential to the social and emotional development of students that cannot be measured by a single test.

Although progress is being made, Leigh admits that she is not satisfied at this point. If deficit thinking still exists in the building, it’s impacting at least one student or one family, and that’s one student and one family too many in her mind. In order to keep working at eliminating deficit thinking, dialogue will be the platform for reform. Parental involvement will continue to be emphasized through home visits and open house. Access will be provided to culturally enriching and rigorous programs of study. Professional development will continue to focus on topics that are essential to the growth of every student. She recognizes that eliminating deficit thinking is a process of helping others overcome assumptions of others based on their own contextual experiences.

When prompted to share advice to other school leaders who are working to bring equity and access to their building, Leigh shares, “Have more dialogue and get as many voices heard as possible. Listen to what other people say, but don’t lose sight of the framework of the different perspectives when you hear something that you don’t necessarily agree with.” Leigh recognizes that as leaders, “We have a unique opportunity to create a culture of support with scheduling and

course selections to be able to support all kids.” She does warn those who have slipped into a role that perpetuates status quo.

If you continue to do things the way that they’ve always been done, nothing is going to change. I think incremental change is important in some ways, but radical change is sometimes needed. If you can find a way to balance the two and also gain trust and have respect within the community and build that culture, then you’ve got it made. It’s a really daunting, exhausting journey, but it’s worthwhile.

Validating the lived experiences of every stakeholder—the parents, students and teachers—is the ultimate goal in addressing deficit thinking. As indicative in this case, eliminating deficit thinking is a process; it is a selfless pursuit of equality that has no end in sight.

“We talk about educating the whole child in theory, but you know, every mission statement that you read talks about creating lifelong learners and mastering concepts. But how often do we really do those things in practice, or do we just do status quo?” For Leigh, the biggest challenge continues to be creating that culture.

The culture that exists today reflects a more social-justice oriented climate than existed five years ago. At Jackson Middle School, professional development is now about dialogue, specifically critical dialogue that considers the perspectives of all stakeholders to build a better appreciation of everyone involved in the process. As a result, each student is not only afforded access and opportunities to courses that were unattainable, but the perception of each student is significantly greater than in the past. In essence, the culture at Jackson Middle School now resembles that of an institution that works diligently to foster an equal and equitable education for every student.

In the next section, Sam’s background will be explored followed by a brief description of Brook Hills High School. Then, an exploration of Sam’s definition of deficit thinking will be examined followed by an analysis of the understanding of deficit thinking at Brook Hills High

School. The strategies employed by Sam to eliminate deficit thinking will be explored along with the challenges faced in overcoming deficit thinking. Finally, the perceived impact the strategies have on students will be discussed. Like Leigh, the foundation of Sam's approach is also dialogue, but the approach is focused more on understanding the perspective of students.

Case 2: Sam Ashford, Brook Hills High School

Some of the teachers that we have do not accept the struggles that our students go through due to their poverty and or ethnic background. Therefore, they create problems for the students because they do not know or do not want to learn how to approach them. (Anonymous teacher survey response)

The above quote is indicative of the general thoughts of staff at Brook Hills High School. Discussions and strategies exist that address the thoughts and practices that perpetuate deficit thinking. Sam is working to eliminate deficit thinking at Brook Hills High School, and he has a solid group of teachers on board with him; however, the overall feeling of the staff is that the problems with academic failures reside in the students' own choices and misfortunes. Programs and policies have effectively been restructured to provide access and opportunities for students who are marginalized, but changing the thinking of the majority of the staff is in its infancy at Brook Hills High School.

Sam has spent 16 years in education. He began his career teaching math for 5 years at the high school level before delving into the world of educational leadership. Sam spent 7 years in various administrative roles as a department chair and assistant principal before taking on the role of principal at Brook Hills for the past 5 years. Sam earned a bachelor's degree in math, a master's degree in educational leadership, and is currently pursuing his doctoral degree in educational leadership.

Sam is a Caucasian male and describes his educational experience as an elementary and high school student as sometimes challenging. “I grew up in poverty, but I didn’t know it because everybody else around me was poor too. It was the only context I knew.” Sam uses that experience to personalize what he does as the school leader, recognizing that it was a combination of people that helped propel him out of an otherwise dismal future. “I had a mom who really pushed me hard and so did a lot of my teachers. I had the benefit of having teachers who took the time to look beyond just sometimes inappropriate behavior and recognized my potential. I think that was the most important thing they could have done for me.” Sam recognizes that his rocky school experience transferred with him into college, where he admits he did not have his priorities straight as he struggled in his first few years of college. He managed to get his life together, and credits the relentless belief of his teachers and mother as contributing to his success. Sam has taken on the task of eliminating deficit thinking as a result of his own contextual experience.

It is this personal experience that Sam brings to the role of a leader who “relentlessly” pursues the academic, social and emotional success of every student. “The experience really got me to think about the way we define success,” Sam claims. “If it is just test scores and grades, then those are pretty superficial—in general teaching is sort of approached that way. We just teach the kids content, but teaching is more than just assignments and tests.” Sam confidently asserts that education is about a reflection of the impact we have as educators, and asking the question, “what have we done to add to the life of our students? What values have they (students) gained because of their time with us?” These are the types of questions Sam ponders in his pursuit to promote a well-rounded learning environment, and he does not hesitate to claim that

everyone needs to continue learning about one another; that includes students, staff and administrators.

School and Community Context

According to Table 2, Brook Hills High School serves approximately 2,000 students; 63% of the student body is White, 18% is Hispanic, 10% is Black, 7% is Asian, and 3% of the student body considers itself Multiracial. Jackson has about a 36% low income rate, and 4% of the students are limited English proficient. Students have a 94% attendance rate and a mobility rate of 8%. Class size average is 20 students at each grade level.

Embedded in the population, but not identifiable in school report card, is a “very large Muslim population that identifies throughout each of those different racial identifiers differently” Sam shares. Sam also points out that one out of every three students is coming from a household near or at the poverty level. He is certain that “even if they’re not identified as low-income, that there are many students and families out there that are financially struggling.” He recognizes that this is especially important to understand as he works to help staff understand the importance of supporting not just the academic success of students, but also the social and emotional aspects of learning. “It is one of our highest priorities to make sure we are understanding and flexible with our students.”

The staff at Brook Hills consists of 140 teachers; 53% are female and 46% are male. 93% of the staff is White, 6% is Hispanic, and 1% is African American. Sam recognizes that the staff does not mirror the student body and continues to work toward hiring a staff that provides positive role models for every student group. The average teaching experience is 11 years. 75% hold a master’s degree or above, and all are highly qualified. According to Table 3, the

instructional expenditures per pupil are about \$8,100 while the operating expenditure per pupil is \$15,500.

For Sam, a typical day is about building relationships and modeling his expectations to staff and students. “My typical day is really to sort of model all the things we talk about with staff and try to make sure that building relationships with staff, building relationships with kids, are true genuine relationships.” Additionally, Sam works at staying abreast of the successes and the challenges of his staff and students. Building such relationships and regularly gaging the pulse of the building is a philosophy he wants everyone to mimic. Sam is adamant about the modeling. He suggests, “The problem is we forget that the adults still have to learn too. So we forget that it really should be a learning-centered building” and modeling is important for every learner whether he or she is a teacher or student.

He stresses the importance of modeling expectations to staff on a consistent basis. “If staff sees leaders treating students really, really well and then hammering teachers because they’re not doing that,” Sam explains, “the teachers are going, ‘wait a minute, what is the right way to do this?’” Sam stresses the importance of modeling for the teachers.

It works by getting teachers to identify themselves with the students. Many times you talk to people, and they get frustrated, and you say, wait a minute. If this was a student/teacher situation or the reverse, they get frustrated with a kid, and I say, okay, now if this was a situation between you and I, how would you want me to handle it? Well, I’d want you to be calm, want you to be poised, want you to work with me, want you to ask me questions and I’d want you to help me. Well, that’s exactly what kids want. Kids will demonstrate behaviors as opposed to address the actual issue. Adults do the same thing. Adults demonstrate behavior. They become vocally against something or they’re passively aggressive.

Sam’s commitment to the importance of modeling helps teachers build a better understating of the individual student. One of his constant approaches to leading to eliminate deficit thinking is to constantly personalize the situation for teachers. This includes leading them into reflective

practices and walking them in the shoes of students. “My first and foremost focus is on making sure that we have a learning-centered environment where everyone understands that personalizing our experiences and building relationships are going to be the foundation for our success,” Sam shares.

Defining Deficit Thinking

Sam was selected for this study through a purposeful sampling approach. He was approached because of his reputation in the education world as a school leader that works to eliminate deficit thinking. This section addresses research question one: “How do secondary school principals define thinking?” His definition of deficit thinking will be explored in this section along with examples of deficit thinking he finds in his building.

Sam defines deficit thinking as “the predetermined belief by a person of authority that a student can or cannot accomplish a task, grasp a concept, improve a skill, or otherwise achieve at a specific level as a result of the student’s prior performance, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or physical characteristics.” Sam shares that this definition is driven primarily by his own contextual experience as a student growing up in poverty.

Cultural Differences are the Root of Deficit Thinking

In the building, Sam defines deficit thinking mostly by the conversations and concerns staff members continue to share with him. Sam believes the root of deficit thinking entails the different backgrounds of the student population with the demographics of the staff. “I think there’s a misperception still amongst our staff that students from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds are not able to succeed in ‘our’ structure.” Sam recognizes that staff

members sometimes misperceive the behaviors of students in specific cluster as inappropriate based on their own perspective or cultural lens.

As an example, staff members have shared with him that some of the “African American students speak in a volume in the halls that is a bit louder than other groups and whose actions may be a little bit different than others.” Another example is the concern of some staff members regarding students who speak Spanish. “They have trouble with students speaking Spanish in the hallways, because, as some staff have shared ‘they should be speaking English.’” Sam recognizes that these examples of deficit thinking stem from cultural differences between the students and staff, but quickly points out that they are only differences, not deficits. Sam’s use of personalization and modeling is to help staff recognize these cultural and linguistic differences as such.

Understanding Deficit Thinking

In order to understand the context of the study, it is important to gauge the extent to which deficit thinking exists at Brook Hills High School. This section entails the exploration of research question two: “How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?” A summary and analysis of the interviews and results from an anonymous teacher survey were used to gather data. The first part explores how Sam understands the prevalence of deficit thinking at Brook Hills High School. The second part explores the extent to which deficit thinking is prevalent based on an anonymous teacher survey.

Principal Perspective: Understanding Deficit Thinking

Sam first identified the prevalence of deficit thinking at Brook Hills High School during his second year as principal. During that time, he was working with the central office to start addressing inequities in program offerings.

It probably became apparent to me when we first addressed the possibility of eliminating tracking and opening our AP program to more students. There was a lot of talk that we were setting kids up for failure because they could not do it.

Sam recognizes that there needs to be a certain level of preparedness for the rigors of an AP course, but knows that many students have not been given that opportunity because of the assumption that if kids are struggling in school it's because they can't do it. "The reality is they're struggling in school because they haven't figured out how yet. That's it. Finding ways to help them be successful should be what we do. It should be our job, and it should be our focus," Sam adamantly shares.

Additionally, Sam identifies deficit thinking by the assumptions teachers make about a group of students based on a microcosm of students that represent characteristics of the same group. More specifically, Sam recognizes that teachers can inadvertently associate behavior with academic success, and that is something he believes is detrimental to student learning. "I have to have conversations with staff to help them decipher between how students are behaving and acting as opposed to what they are truly capable of doing." Accordingly, Sam finds that teachers want to limit academic opportunities to some students based on behavior records and not academic potential. "They just have to realize that actions that do not fit their ideal student mold are sometimes derived from cultural influences than a lack of academic ability." Sam cautions teachers to reflect on situations to see if their instructional approach is sometimes a contributor to the behavioral problems.

Staff Perspective: Understanding Deficit Thinking

According to the anonymous survey administered to the Brook hills staff as part of this study, there are a total of thirty-two written reasons as to why a student fails. According to Table 7, 26 cite the student as the reason. Included in the comments (number of references in parenthesis): student lack of motivation/focus (6), lack of preparation/skills (5), poor attendance (4), lack of interest (3), lack of confidence (3), does not complete assignments/ does not participate in class (2), over commitment/lack of sleep (2), not connected to school (1). Five of the comments list the parent or home factors as reasons for student failure. These include: personal problems at home, socioeconomic status, lack of parental follow-through, parents do not speak English, and lack of parental help. None of the comments suggest the school as a reason. In essence, according to staff, the reason that students fail lies outside the realm of the school or the teacher. Consequently, accountability lies not with the school or staff, but with perceived marginalizing life scenarios.

Table 8

Teacher Survey Responses: Reasons Students Fail

Indicator	Responses	Percentage
Student lack of effort/motivation	6	20
Lack of preparation/skills	5	15
Poor attendance	4	13
Lack of interest	3	10
Lack of confidence	3	10
Lack of Parental support	3	10
Does not complete assignments/participate	2	6
Over commitment/lack of sleep	2	6
Not connected to school	1	3
Home life factors/Housing conditions	1	3
Student has a language barrier	1	3
Economic situation	1	3

The survey strongly suggests that staff members at Brook Hills High School blame the student and his or her home factors as the primary reason as to why a student fails. This is

consistent with Sam's assertion that students and their home life factors or life experiences are accepted by staff as the reason for the poor academic performance of students who are marginalized.

According to the same survey (Table 8), an overwhelming majority (72%) of staff members do not feel the educational structure today is the same as the structure in which the teacher attended high school. An even greater percentage (88%) feel the current education structure provides opportunities for students who are marginalized to succeed despite the differences that they perceive exist in the structure today. What is most alarming is that even though the majority of staff members feel students who are marginalized can succeed, they overwhelmingly feel (64%) the current structure needs to reinvent itself to meet the needs of students.

Most teachers feel that the educational structure is different than when they attended school, yet the majority blame students and families (Table 7) for the lack of academic success, not the school structure. Additionally, although the majority of teachers feel that students can still succeed in this structure despite the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural differences, they feel the current structure needs to change. A disconnect exists between how teachers understand academic achievement and the educational structure. In that disconnect may lie an explanation for the existence of deficit thinking.

Table 9

Teacher Survey Responses: Current Educational Structure

Questions	Very much	Much	Little	Very little	<i>n</i>
The current educational structure is the same structure in which I attended and succeeded during my K-12 school experience.	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)	35.7% (5)	35.7% (5)	14
Every student has the opportunity to	50.0% (7)	35.7% (5)	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	14

succeed in the current educational structure despite any differences in language, culture, and socio-economic status.					
The current educational structure needs to reinvent itself by incorporating the latest research on learning to address the shift in student demographics.	14.3% (2)	50.0% (7)	35.7% (5)	0.0% (0)	14

Strategies and Challenges of Eliminating Deficit Thinking

Sam's mission to eliminate deficit thinking begins at the the level of the students. "We're really good at sorting and selecting kids. It's a system. But then again, our system was built that way. It was built to have some kids be successful and some kids not," Sam shares. He is cognizant that the selection process is unfortunately drawn along racial and economic lines that perpetuate inequities in education. Sam stresses the fact that society is okay with this system because it is based on our capitalist approach to living, and many are perfectly content with sorting and segregating kids. "Unfortunately, this approach is faulty because the system was never set up to be equal." Sam contends that he is not satisfied with the system and works diligently to erase the lines of discrimination it has created in education. Sam's intentions are deliberate, but he is still novice to the notion of working to eliminate deficit thinking. This section examines research questions three and four: "What strategies do secondary principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?" and "What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?" The data presented here are collected from case interviews, case observations, and an anonymous teacher survey.

Although Sam employs specific strategies to eliminate deficit thinking, he never wavers from the notion that it is about personalizing the situation for the student. As Table 9 suggests, Sam addresses deficit thinking in several realms and from several different perspectives. Along with each strategy he employs, Sam finds challenges to his efforts.

Table 10

Strategies to Eliminate Deficit Thinking at Brook Hills

Indicator	Stakeholder perspective	Context	Reason
Professional development	Staff	Peer coaching	Empower change agents
Dialogue	Students/Staff	Committees	Create space
Access	Staff	Individual and groups	Cultural tolerance
	Students	De-tracking	More rigorous education
	Extra-curricular	Cultural exposure	
Personnel	Teachers	Staffing	Relative life experiences
	Teachers	Administrative support	Encourage new initiatives

Sam is committed to eliminating deficit thinking at Brook Hills, but he does so with challenges. Although he is embedded in his pursuit through professional development, continuous dialogue, increased student access, and personnel decisions, his strategies are met with some resistance. The greatest challenge is the embedded culture that believes the old way of education is the best way because many of the predominately White, English speaking staff members were successful in that context. Helping his embedded staff overcome their own contextual experiences is the biggest challenge to eliminating deficit thinking.

Professional Development for Peer-Coaching

Above anything else, Sam believes the key to overcoming deficit thinking is to address it with the staff through professional development. He does not center the professional development around himself though; it is based on the professionalism of his staff. Sam recognizes that the greatest impact on student achievement occurs at the classroom level. Therefore, Sam focuses his professional development program on the peer-coaching program at Brook Hills High School. Although dialogue is a part of the process, the focus of the program is on the process itself.

The peer-coaching program is an alternative route to administratively lead professional development. The basis of the program is to partner master teachers with novice and other experienced teachers based on specific objectives. At Brook Hills High School, the objective is to reach all learners that struggle academically outside the mold of the traditional teacher-centered classroom. In many cases, Sam finds these non-traditional students are primarily students who are marginalized because their contextual experiences vary from that of the teacher. Providing support to staff to effectively reach a greater number of students is the premise of the program.

The peer-coaching training program is conducted on a monthly basis. The approach is broken into several facets. It consists of peer-to-peer meetings and staff training facilitated by staff members. The context of the meetings entails instructional techniques and instructional strategies that address learning differences. Sam refers to them as their “universal high quality instructional strategies.” When prompted to elaborate as to why that is important, Sam shares that it is about “getting teachers to understand that not every kid is the same, and not every kid learns the same way.” Sam feels it is especially important knowing that those differences are sometimes aligned with a student’s contextual experience, an experience that is often a result of the student’s cultural, linguistic or socio-economic background.

Additionally, to help monitor the program and its implementation, the process consists of unannounced, quarterly walk-through observations. Peer coaches walk into classrooms all eight periods of the day to observe in five minute increments. The coaches record instructional strategies that were observed, assessment techniques that were utilized, conversations that occurred, and the extent to which students were on task. Observers will occasionally engage students in conversations about the tasks and objectives in which they are working. “We have

our own teachers monitoring our own performance. It took four years to build to this point, but it's turned the conversation toward what are we doing for kids versus what are kids not doing," Sam states.

The peer-coaching approach is ingrained in the culture at Brook Hills, but in terms of addressing deficit thinking, it has some shortcomings. Although the approach identifies the best practices for targeting the learning needs of each student, there was nothing to indicate that the approach has a lens for identifying the interactions between the teacher and students from the dominant student group, and between the teacher and students from marginalized groups. Such an approach may help Sam and the staff recognize and correct any misguided instructional strategies or topics that alienate groups. Such data could be beneficial to determine how well the staff engages students who are marginalized in the context of everyday learning. A more focused approach would be more indicative of "a relentless pursuit" to address and eliminate deficit thinking.

Challenges to Professional Development for Peer Coaching

Sam finds that his biggest challenge to eliminating deficit thinking is getting teachers to truly live Brook Hills' vision to eliminate the practices so that every student is afforded the same equity and access. Despite the concerted efforts to provide professional development in the areas of peer coaching, Sam finds the professional development training is meaningless if teachers do not fully believe that every student can succeed.

Sam recognizes that while some students are emotionally, socially, and academically prepared for high school, other students are not. "The ones who are not, though, we can't just put them to the side because they have some perceived deficit." Sam struggles with teachers who take the mindset that these students need a different type of education, separate from the

dominant school culture. He knows that if these students are placed in an environment of lowered expectations, they will never reach the higher level. Referring to the marginalized group, Sam shares, “They don’t even know what higher expectations look like because they never lived it. So you’ve got to put them in that environment and then support them along the way.” Sam knows that putting them in different learning environments means they are perpetuating status quo, and status quo does not promote equity in teaching and learning.

Sam struggles with teachers who accept the notion of status quo when status quo accepts practices that marginalize students. Although he challenges limiting status quo practices, he continues to personalize the situation for teachers to help each one recognize the impact of deficit thinking.

I look at teachers who struggle in the classroom and then sometimes flair out with behavior, no differently than a student who does the same thing. Students will exhibit behaviors because they don’t understand something. Teachers exhibit behaviors because they don’t understand something. We are supposed to accept it for adults, but punish kids accordingly. The reality is there are cultural and linguistic differences that spurn classroom struggles that often result in off-task behavior. We need to look hard at that.

Sam often asks teachers who are struggling with such practices as classroom management or instructional delivery if he should send them to a classroom for teachers of lowered expectations, release them, or support them to become mastery teachers. By all accounts, teachers respond that they want the support to be master teacher; they do not want to be pawned off because they are struggling with something new. “That is their ‘aha’ moment,” Sam shares proudly. “We are so ready to move students who struggle academically or pawn them off into a lower track, but when we struggle as adults, we want support to succeed. Students need the same thing.”

Dialogue That Creates Space and Builds Tolerance

Sam insists he uses dialogue to help create an understanding of and empathy for students who are marginalized. One of the goal of Sam’s initiative is to help staff and students “create

space” to foster a greater sense of commonality. Additionally, Sam uses dialogue to build a culture of tolerance for all students.

Sam believes in making Brook Hills a place for everyone to take pride in whom they are, but he also wants everyone to be cognizant of the fact that no student or group exists in isolation. “We do work with all of our students about what we call space usage and volume in the building. There’s a personal space that everyone has a comfort level with, and it differs depending upon the person. We talk about acknowledging that space.” Sam elaborates that space issues are a concern for staff and students based on conversations he has had over the years. Sam recognizes it as a cultural issue. “People have to realize that we all act according to our context, and our context is shaped by our culture.” With Brook Hills’ diverse population, Sam decided to take steps to build a common understanding of acceptable space.

The process involved dialogue with representatives from each stakeholder group and was comprised of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds that exist in the building. The commission, as referenced by Dan, created an acceptable policy on creating space.

Unlike his peer-coaching approach in professional development, this approach specifically recognizes and validates the lived experiences of the diverse population at Brook Hills. As opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach to such issues as acceptable volume and terminology that would have been heavily biased toward the context of the White culture, Sam utilized a more democratic approach. “That was enlightening for a lot of us, including me,” Sam shares. Before the commission, Sam was not cognizant that volume associated differently with students of different cultural backgrounds. “With some of our students, they associate volume with celebrating and praising, and that carries into their everyday demeanor. The volume is who they are and it is not meant to be inconsiderate or rude toward others.”

On the other hand, Sam found that some student groups associate school as a place of respect, and therefore those students speak less often and in more subtle tones. “As a school, we had to come to an understanding about what is acceptable for all of us because in all reality, the school is the most diverse place some of these kids see in any given week.” The policies and procedures, better known as “The Student Promise,” were developed by the commission to create space where everyone can feel at ease, but without disrupting the learning environment for others. Specifically providing a voice to every student group, no matter the physical size of the group, is representative of a more deeply democratic approach to leadership, and is a solid example of Sam’s “relentless pursuit” to eliminate deficit thinking.

Sam also recognized that staff needed to share the same sentiments in the classroom. “Sometimes staff members speak too loudly when they become frustrated with students.” Accordingly, Sam knows the staff needs to be cognizant of the fact that they are role models and need to act accordingly. Sam uses the student promise as a reminder to staff that they need to also demonstrate acceptable levels of volume when dealing with students who are acting inappropriately.

If you lose control, they’re going to scream and yell right back because they don’t know any different. So we work with our staff to understand that you come to the situation poised and comfortable, and with a standard level of volume. Say, excuse me, can we talk for a second.

Sam reinforces the notion of modeling expectations for students.

Sam also works with teachers to help them recognize when to emotionally remove themselves from a situation so they do not take it personally. He reminds teachers to speak quietly to the students when they are off-task so the student does not feel he is on stage.

“Remove them (students) physically from the classroom and discuss it with them. You’re teaching them. You’re helping them understand that what they did.” This, he believes, will help

deter situations from escalating and alleviate any concerns that the predominately White staff is targeting one of the marginalized populations. As Sam indicates, “perception” is reality and he knows they have to work hard to keep a sense of equity and opportunity in the building if they want every student to feel valued. This example underscores Sam’s recognition that his student body is quite diverse, and situations have to be handled with sensitivity as to the needs of each student’s cultural experience.

In addition to creating space, Sam also used dialogue as a foundation to foster tolerance in the building. The need stemmed from concerns regarding the use of certain slang by students. According to Sam, certain terms were becoming a problem at Brook Hills, especially as the terms became more accepted in the everyday vernacular but were derogatory in nature. To address the issue, Sam again assembled a diverse commission to build understanding for such terms to help students from each group understand why some terms may be insulting to others. “I had to help kids educate one another as to why a term is considered insulting to an individual or group, even if the term is accepted by others in the same group.” Sam indicated it was not to point fingers or to lay blame on anyone. It was “a real honest conversation about some of the assumptions we make with terms that really should not be used in our building or anywhere in general despite mass media’s blatant use of them.” Through the conversations and work of the commission to bring awareness to derogatory, mainstream slang, Sam recognized that students have a more sophisticated appreciation of one another’s culture. Students have come to embrace an understanding of one another’s cultural history and why each person may respond differently to seemingly harmless slang.

During a visit to Brook Hills High School, I observed Sam address close to 200 students during an assembly on bullying. Sam greeted the 5th period health/P.E. students and briefly stated

that they were in attendance for a presentation on bullying that was produced in-house by one of the counselors. The counselor created the project as part of a Type 75 (administrative) certification program. Sam spent a few moments discussing the relevance of the topic, the seriousness of bullying, and ended with the notion that it is very personal to him.

During the presentation, Sam sat amongst the students. The presenter used a Power Point presentation to cover some facts on bullying, shared her own personal experience, and then introduced a video segment on “Someone you Know.” In the video presentation, two teachers and Sam gave a video testimony regarding what it is like to be bullied as a high school student. In Sam’s portion, he shared a story of his freshmen year when he was bullied by a group of upperclassmen during his first week of high school. Sam shared what they verbally said to him; the tormenting forced him to drop out of the public high school and enroll in a private high school for the remainder of the year. Sam shared how he was too embarrassed to tell his parents why he wanted to transfer so he made up a story about wanting a more challenging environment. After his freshmen year, the bullies graduated and Sam asked his parents to re-enroll at the public school so that he could be with his friends again.

Sam summarized his testimony by reiterating that bullying impacts lives. He specifically cautioned that some people bully others who are culturally, linguistically, or physically different or have chosen alternative lifestyles. He stressed the seriousness of that type of bullying as dangerous because it is often based on prejudices, prejudices he correlates with deficit thinking practices.

At the conclusion of the video, there was a brief silence and then a round of applause. When the clapping ceased, the presenter continued with the presentation, reiterating to students

that bullying a person because he or she has differences is wrong. After the presentation, several students and staff thanked or acknowledged Sam as they exited the assembly.

During an afternoon passing period, a staff member stopped to thank Sam for the video. “You know, you really relate to these kids. It is great that you are putting yourself out there for the kids. They need it.” Sam thanked the teacher.

As indicated in the interview, Sam works relentlessly to personalize the life of someone who is marginalized. His testimony puts a face on bullying so that kids can better identify with Sam and the notion of not stereotyping those who are different from an individual as an avenue to ridicule the other. Such actions marginalize people. Sam demonstrates the importance of personalizing it by putting himself in the shoes of his students. More importantly, he continues to allude to the notion of the differences created in school contexts based on cultural, linguistic, lifestyle, physical or socio-economic differences. Accordingly, the message was well received by most staff and students.

Sam recognizes the positive impact dialogue has on the culture of the building. “In the entire school setting, we’ve talked about what inappropriateness looks like, and it’s been sensitive to everyone’s needs. But it’s also been approached from a standpoint of, what do we need to be successful here as a school,” Sam states. In the pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking, dialogue will never end. Dialogue continues to be a part of the process.

We don’t assume that once we have a conversation to build understanding that everybody knows it because every year 25% of our student population changes, and every year our teaching population changes. To some extent, our staff population changes, and they need reminders, need to reteach it, need the opportunity to redevelop those skills and sharpen their understanding.

With that, Sam continually makes dialogue a part of his leadership approach. It is another example of his awareness of the different cultural identities at Brook Hills and his intentional leadership to build an understanding of the differences for the greater good of the building.

According to the anonymous staff survey administered as part of the research, Sam's approach to engaging students in dialogue regarding their needs in schools is overwhelming supported by staff (Table 10). Sam's ability to reach the community and foster positive relationships with the community is deemed one of his leadership strengths by his staff. Although the staff is more divided about how well Sam engages them in conversations to foster positive relationships, the overwhelming perception of staff is that Sam engages them in conversations regarding marginalized student and uses the opportunities to empower staff members to take leadership roles in the strategies students need to succeed. Based on the interview questions and Sam's consistent responses to foster a common understanding, he effectively uses dialogue in his pursuit of eliminating deficit thinking by creating space for all and fostering a community of tolerance.

Table 11

Survey Response

Question	Very much	Much	Little	Very little	<i>n</i>
To what extent do you think your principal:					
Fosters positive relationships with students.	100.0% (14)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	14
Fosters positive relationships with parents.	85.7% (12)	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	14
Fosters positive relationships with staff.	35.7% (5)	50.0% (7)	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	14
Engages stakeholders in conversations regarding marginalized students.	42.9% (6)	42.9% (6)	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	14

Empowers stakeholders to take leadership roles in the learning of all students, especially the marginalized.	42.9% (6)	57.1% (8)	0.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	14
Keeps the learning of every student as the focus of his or her mission.	64.3% (9)	28.6% (4)	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	14

Note. “Marginalized” refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

Challenges to Fostering Dialogue

Although much time and energy goes into conversations regarding the influx of students in the English as a Second Language program, Sam finds that a contingent of teachers adamantly believes every student should be speaking English in the building.

We’ve worked a lot on both sides of that conversation by meeting with our staff to help them understand and build a tolerance of language differences, but also with students to understand their environments. We do not need students to assimilate, but we do expect them to have an understanding of what they’ll encounter outside of here. So it’s a teachable moment in both directions.

Although progress is being made, Sam still has to help staff deal with discipline referrals that are written because students were “speaking Spanish in the halls.”

Additionally, Sam is challenged by the community because of their own assumptions and prejudices. Many of Sam’s initiatives have created a more diverse learning environment. Some parents are not comfortable with this. “On a rare occasion, I’ll have people saying they don’t want their kid with those kids.” Sam challenges the comments by asking back, “Which kids are those?” He wants them to point blank say that they don’t want them with a certain race or ethnicity.” Sam admits he has grown more direct with issues of discrimination because he realizes honest dialogue is the only way to shed light on the issue.

Stakeholders in the community also voice concerns with the schools’ recognition of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender groups.

When we recognized the national day of silence, I fielded a couple of phone calls asking how we can support that. I said, I'm not supporting homosexuality in any regard. I'm supporting a silent protest of disrespectful behavior toward others; as a school we should always stand for. And I said, I would hope that as a parent or as a community member you would also stand for that.

Sam is adamant about creating space for every student. More so than anything, he wants to create a safe and respectful learning environment for every student. Unfortunately, the approach brings challenges from some of the unlikeliest stakeholders.

Sam recognizes another challenge for Brook Hills is recognizing other students or groups that need support in some manner. "Who else is marginalized because of our structure and assumptions? Who else is out there that we're not challenging enough? So our next challenge is identifying who we're not challenging enough." Sam relies on the continuous dialogue opportunities afforded stakeholders at Brook Hills, but he also knows that their approach is not perfect. Creating more space for dialogue is an ongoing challenge.

Providing Access for Students

Every individual brings his or her cultural capital to the classroom. Sam believes providing students the access to the cultural capital of the each discourse is critical to the success of a high school student. In an effort to foster cultural tolerance, it is also important for those in the dominant discourse to be exposed to the cultural capital of those in the marginalized discourse. However, tracking practices prohibit such mutual exposure to cultural capital. As a result, Sam is committed to providing students who are marginalized with more access to rigorous academic and extra-curricular programs. More specifically, Sam works to eliminate the basic level classes across the curriculum to provide all students with a more sound and college-readiness program and culturally enriching experience for every student. As a result, he also

ensures that every student has an opportunity to take on a leadership role in a context that fosters their cultural identity.

Sam became a proponent of the idea of de-tracking several years ago after spending some time speaking with seniors in the basic level program. “I spoke with them; they were as bright and sharp as any kid in the building. The problem was that the stigma of the program created a self-fulfilling prophecy that they were dumb, and they felt they were not going to be able to go to college.” According to Sam, the repetition of that feedback forced him to think hard about the education they were providing students. It led him on a quest to work with the central office to revisit and eventually eliminate the tracking system.

He realized that there was a significant social impact that was being overlooked. “The reality is the majority of the students in those classes were Black and Hispanic boys.” Therefore, there was a significant segment of the marginalized population that was not part of the conversations that transpired in the more rigorous courses. As a result, Sam took on the responsibility of eliminating such a train of thought that specifically marginalized student groups.

Sam’s approach was not small; he took a significant leap in bringing programming equity to Brook Hills over the following 2 years. Not only did he help eliminate basic level tracking, he also worked with the honors and Advanced Placement teachers to create opportunities for more students to learn. There was resistance, but Sam pushed forward with the initiative.

To address the needs of the students in the more rigorous programs, Sam implemented 14 different teams of co-taught sections that consisted of regular and special education students.

Sam admits,

It takes dedication, time, and effort to restructure a system. It takes the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the students rather than doing what is best for the adults. That was the problem; we wanted what was best for us.

The co-taught sections were implemented to aide teachers and students in the transition. Sam recognizes that some students were enrolled with skill gaps, but he blames himself and the structure for some of those skill gaps. It became his responsibility to make it right. By creating more rigorous learning opportunities for students and providing teachers and students with the support needed to address those gaps, Sam feels he is making up for lost opportunities and setting up every student to succeed despite any differences.

When discussing the additional enrichment courses that students who are marginalized are currently afforded, Sam beams with pride. “The fun part is our elective classes have been doing this for years. They know how to differentiate for kids. They get them all in one group. They know how to teach those kids.” For the elective courses, differentiating to the needs of each student is an accepted practice. To Sam, it reassures him that there is a way to reach every kid.

He recognizes how the elective courses have successfully differentiated their instruction to meet the needs of students of various learning styles, and that is having a trickledown effect on the core areas, especially the AP and honors tracks. This is important to Sam as the floodgates have been opened to afford more students opportunities in AP, honors and other enriching courses. More importantly, it provides more opportunities for staff to connect with students and for students who are marginalized to partake in some of the conversations the basic level classes never provided. The notion of access transcended the English as a Second Language (ESL) and foreign language program at Brook Hills.

During one visit to Brook Hills, I observed Sam in a meeting with a small group of teachers involved in the ESL and foreign language programs. The purpose of the meeting was to

discuss the placement of native Spanish speakers into the proper program. Sam led the discussion, starting with the notion that “We want to do what is best for our students, not our programs.” Sam was referring to the fact that some teachers in the foreign language program wanted a specific type of student to take Spanish for Native Speakers (higher-achieving students) and wanted to pawn other students off into the ESL program. Specifically, native speakers with a weak academic background were being cast off to ESL while less-fluent Spanish speakers and English speaking students who are more academically successful were being selected for the Spanish program.

Although it doesn’t state it in the curriculum guide, the teachers of the Spanish for Native Speaker program feel their program is geared toward honors students. They feel the “other” native speaker students need to take ESL. The ESL staff insists that although the students do speak Spanish, they are fluent enough in English and do not qualify for ESL services. During the conversation, one ESL instructor contended that “ESL is not a basic track for Spanish speakers that you don’t like.” The Spanish teacher asked, “Then what do we do with students- with behavior problems?” The conversation aligns with Sam’s assertion that some staff members do associate behavior with academic potential.

During the meeting, Sam reiterated that everybody needs to recognize that the decision will be based on the best interest of the student. He further reminded staff that sometimes behavior is a response to the instructional delivery, suggesting that the pacing of the Spanish program may need to be revisited if the students are coming in at a higher Spanish proficiency rate than in the past as the district’s Hispanic population is growing. The Spanish teacher responded that the curriculum is not the problem, but the students are different and do not

understand formal Spanish; he insisted their program is designed for the more formally educated Spanish speaker.

After some deliberation between the two groups, Sam engaged in the conversation. He insisted that although the Spanish for Native Speakers program is rigorous, it is not intended to be a “selective or elite” program. He further stated that the reason some of the students may have struggled academically in the past is because they were never able to fully express their identity through their culture and language. He posited that “this course (Spanish for Native Speakers) might be just what the kids need to excel academically.” He reminded teachers that Spanish for Native Speakers is not a selective class and placing native speakers in the class who happen to also speak fluent English is best for those students. He reminded the group that ESL is for students who need the additional support in learning English as a second language; “it is not a cast off for students you do not want.”

The meeting concluded with a protocol that any student who identifies himself as a Native Speaker and scores high enough on the language proficiency test can enroll in Spanish for Native Speakers. If a student does not score high enough on the English language proficiency test, he or she will be placed in ESL per ISBE guidelines. When a teacher asked what they were supposed to do with the kids that failed, Sam gently replied, “that is why I hired you. You have that responsibility to find a way to reach them and support them.”

The last comment reiterates Sam’s commitment to hiring the best personnel with the ability to understand and address the needs of each student. When it comes to student learning gaps and differentiated instruction, Sam is adamant that each teacher has the ability to reach students, but they have to think about their traditional models that work for a specific segment of

students. Staff members are expected to be able to personalize the academic experience for every student in an effort to help every student succeed.

Sam is witness to the outcome for students whom do not experience success at school. His awareness helps keep a focus on every student. Without a concerted vision to help every student, the future of some is very predictable.

If a kid drops out, if a kid leaves school, they don't really leave. They still live in town. They probably live with their parents. They will continue to live with their parents. They have no skills. They will not contribute to our society very well. They won't be able to contribute to our economy. And chances are they're still coming back here at 3:00 every day because they've got nowhere else to go. They're going to show up here, because this is the place that they know. So why don't we keep them here? Why don't we keep them and make sure that we're working with them to be successful.

Sam speaks of these students from experience. He feels a sense of personal failure when he greets former dropouts, now in their early 20s, hanging out at the school's football games, knowing very well that if the school had just tried something different or if one more people reached out to the student, then the student could be on a different path at this point in his or her life. Sam's passion for at-risk students can be seen as a reflection of his own challenges. Had it not been for teachers that believed in his potential and pushed him, Sam knows his outcome could be much different.

Outside the classroom, Sam works with staff to provide access to other enriching opportunities, especially in the areas of leadership. His pupil personnel team runs nearly twenty different student groups. Each year, the students are surveyed about the types of student groups they are part of or would like to see developed at Brook Hills. In the past few years, Brook Hills has created specific groups for students who are marginalized that are fully supported by the administration and staff.

One of the most recent additions is the African American Leadership Organization created specifically to foster strong, African American male students into leaderships. Sam shares, “The term leadership is used specifically because these are students that our own African American community liaison and our social workers identify as having potential to be leaders, but they have not been educated or mentored on those skills.” The adult mentees work specifically with them about what it’s going to take for them to be successful beyond school. Sam believes that by providing students with such opportunities in a structured manner is helping to provide paths for these students that probably would not have been a possibility in the past.

Brook Hills also offers a Latina Girls Organization that focuses on instilling a sense of independence and self-confidence. Based on the surveys and subsequent conversations, the group was organized to help young, Latina females choose alternative paths that break from their norm.

For years, we had an overrepresentation of young Latina females moving into early motherhood roles because that is what they have seen with other Latina females. Based on conversations with members from the Latino community, we decided we needed to expose these young ladies to other opportunities.

From those conversations, Sam helped launch the organization.

The mission of the Latina Girls Organization is to expose the girls to female Latina role models. Their continuous message is about improving the quality of life for girls based on setting goals, committing to school, and making choices that help girls achieve those goals.

Additionally, Sam has worked with the staff to create several other groups over the past five years that deal with specific segments of the school population. There is a grieving group focused on students who have lost loved ones. There is a support group that works specifically on the social and emotional needs of students. Brook Hills also has an academic-based group that supports students who have moved to the advanced level and need continuous support to

overcome the challenges of a rigorous learning environment. While reflecting on the amount of support groups offered, Sam shares, “A lot of times it’s more one-on-one, it’s individualized.” Although not specifically stated, the groups have grown to purposely represent cultural groups and to provide them with the support needed that the existing structure could not provide. It is an approach that helps all students find a sense of belonging and validate their lived experiences.

Sam is committed to providing a place for every single student to feel welcome, and he purposely seeks out opportunities for students of marginalized groups to find a sense of belonging. He recognizes that school structures often cultivate themselves for specific student groups, and in the process they alienate a large number of marginalized groups. Sam works to specifically bring a sense of purpose to students of every cultural background.

“We try to—if we don’t offer a club or activity, we want the kids to come forward and share what they think would be really interesting for us.” Sam knows the importance of connecting with students to keep them engaged in school, and he will engage them through whatever means that he can.

If we just address the academic supports, we often miss the opportunity to address the true background and needs of kids. If we address just the social and emotional supports, we forget that their purpose here is to be academically successful. We have to balance both of those when we’re working with kids.

Sam’s approach reinforces the importance of utilizing feedback from students to drive the decision-making process, especially the feedback from those who have not had such opportunities in the past.

On the surface, it would seem that the creation of such groups further alienates or segregates students who are marginalized from the dominant context. In reality, the dominant context has never provided an equal opportunity for students who are marginalized to foster leadership skills. Even if granted leadership roles in the dominant contexts, many marginalized

students would fail. The premise of the separate programs at Brook Hills is to provide a platform for all students to foster leadership skills so that he or she may evolve and become active leaders in the world after high school. Brook Hills provides the opportunity to succeed. It is in essence an equitable training opportunity with a truer potential for real world application.

Challenges to Providing Access for Students

Although the initiative to provide students with increased rigor by eliminating basic tracks and pushing more kids into AP has taken form over the past four years, the strategy is met with considerable resistance.

We still have some teachers that say, you know, this kid shouldn't be here. This kid can't do this. This kid is not an AP kid. This kid still needs a basic level. And I remind them. I say, listen; first of all, that's somebody's kid. That's not just this kid. This is somebody's son or daughter. So let's remind ourselves of that.

Sam struggles with getting staff to understand that students can get it, but not every student is going to get it with the same instruction or at the same time. Sam shares the following sentiments.

I always try to acknowledge to others outside of here, let's not minimize our response to this. Let's not take a narrow view. Let's look at it from a broader perspective. Let's look at the piece that our purpose here is bigger than just grades and test scores. Our purpose here is to make sure that these men and women have all the tools and skills to be successful when they leave us, no matter what they choose to do. To do that, that means you've got to let every kid have access to that. Not just some, not just a percentage.

Sam recognizes it takes time to build that capacity and understanding. He works with staff to remind them that students are in school because they need us. "If they didn't need us, they wouldn't be here," he shares.

Sam also struggles with staff members that believe the initiatives are too difficult. They share comments with Sam that it is hard to differentiate, and it is hard to have a mix of achievement levels in one class. "I have a diverse staff as well. It's pretty hard as a principal

when you have 140 people that all have different philosophies, beliefs, techniques, and skill sets.” He often reminds staff that they work with the same people he does so they should not pretend that everybody is on the same playing surface. “We differentiate for staff members the same way.” Sam helps to personalize the situation for staff by reminding them that the world is diverse. Teachers do not have the luxury of classifying kids accordingly to make the learning environment easier or more efficient. He continues to help the members of his staff understand that diversifying the learning environment is preparing students for the world.

Working With Personnel

In the area of personnel, two themes emerge that specifically address the needs of marginalized student groups. When hiring staff, Sam takes into consideration the lived experiences of candidates. This assured him that he was hiring personnel that share in his vision. In the area of leadership, Sam knows that he is asking teachers to challenge their mindset and practices in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking. In doing so, he knows he has to provide support to teachers who are willing to take big risks in what they do every day.

When asked about his hiring practices, Sam states, “We look for staff members that have encountered, embraced, and overcome challenges in their own life. That’s one of our first priorities.” Sam believes this is an essential because of the plethora of challenges students have to deal with on a daily basis. He cites examples of single parent households, students living in poverty or near poverty, and students living in displaced situations. Sam adds that another one of his highest priorities “is making sure that we are hiring staff members that are understanding and flexible with our students, but still recognizing the need for high expectations academically.” Sam elaborates that every student wants to succeed, and every student wants to feel like someone cares. He also recognizes that staff members sometimes forget this, but when they can identify

with the struggles students encounter, they can reach both the student and his or her academic potential.

Sam identifies with teachers that have struggled either academically or personally as a student because it allows them to “personalize the learning environment for students.” Sam elaborates, “If they don’t have an understanding of student’s lives, they won’t be able to build an effective relationship. It’ll be very superficial.” Sam realizes that it is easy to develop superficial relationships where people go through actions, but no connections are made. Students get lost in this scenario. Sam believes that teachers who can reflect on their own challenges are more likely to help students overcome challenges that they may not have been able to embrace or overcome themselves. An ideal candidate for Sam is someone who can reflect on his or her struggles, and identify an adult that helped make sense of the difficult situation. “Those are the people that students will run through a wall for because the students know the teachers care about them.” Sam recognizes that identifying with students who feel marginalized takes somebody truly special. He commits significant time and energy into going out and finding them. It is yet another part of his “relentless pursuit” to eliminate deficit thinking.

At the classroom level, Sam recognizes the importance of providing continuous support for teachers who are working with him to eliminate deficit thinking. “It means that when a teacher has an idea for a non-traditional approach that will help bridge the gap in the academic setting—then as a leader you have to go out and find a way to make it happen.” As a leader, Sam recognizes that if he curbs proactive approaches, then he is negating his expectations that teachers need to be creative with students who struggle in the traditional academic setting. “If you tell people no, they’ll shut down.” Sam believes you have to know a great idea and help the teacher find a way to make it happen, because you’ve got to be able to mold that back into what

you need it to be.” Sam believes in taking the enthusiasm, the excitement, and the ideas of proactive staff members and put it back in line with the rest of the vision.

Challenges to Working With Personnel

In the area of personnel, Sam’s biggest obstacle is the negative influence of veteran staff members on new teachers. Sam finds that “I have to spend a considerable amount of time working with the new and non-tenured teachers to help steer them clear of the small, but powerful deficit culture that still exists in this building.” Sam is cognizant of the influence veteran teachers can have on new teachers, and the influence of the union is significant. “Unfortunately, our union leadership is comprised of some of the most deficit thinking staff.” Sam responds accordingly by meeting regularly with new staff and bringing in other veteran teachers who share his vision to help train new teachers.

Impact of Working to Eliminate Deficit Thinking

In this section, Sam shares some of the more meaningful results of his efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. This section addresses research question five: “What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?” The impact is measured by specific indicators in grading and access. Sam cites the increased distribution of passing grades in co-taught classes with the elimination of the lower tracks. He also recognizes that Advanced Placement student enrollment is comprised of a larger number of students who are marginalized as an indicator of success. He also credits the increased number of program offerings for students as a contributor to the increased graduation rate of minority students and students of low income households. Common in these successes is the notion that each has resulted in a more positive and equitable learning environment for students.

Grade Distribution

Sam recognizes the elimination of tracking as an indicator of success in the elimination of deficit thinking. It was a challenge to get both the students and staff to accept de-tracking because of the fear of setting students up to fail, but the impact has been monumental. “It’s been an outstanding implementation. One of our algebra co-taught sections is outperforming a traditional algebra section because you have two adults who are vested highly in the success of those kids.” Sam recognizes the academic expectations for these students are higher than when they were in a lower track class. “We’re finding new ways to continue to push and challenge kids and to provide them with support and higher expectations.” The co-taught section comprises a diverse population with students that are marginalized, but his staff has found a way to work with those differences and the grade distribution reflects that. “Teachers were concerned there would be a lot more failures, but the opposite has occurred. More students are passing.”

Upon reflection, Sam’s shares this as his most gratifying accomplishment. “We can never really know the impact this is having on the quality of life for marginalized students. We do know we had them do something that neither they nor the staff would have thought possible.” Sam shares his excitement with caution as it also alerts him to the untapped potential of the staff and students in light of this success.

AP Growth

The success of the AP program is also noted by Sam. “When I think of where we were and where we are now, it is amazing,” Sam confides. Over the last 5 years, AP enrollment has increased by almost 200%. “We had enrollments of fewer than 400 AP students and we are now over 1,200. We have more AP test takers, and we are maintaining our score distributions. More kids have access, and we still have the same percentage of kids earning 3, 4’s and 5’s,” Sam

proudly shares. “That’s exciting, that’s a success.” To Sam, it is also an identification that they weren’t really doing what they should have been doing years ago. “We were not challenging kids.” Sam recognizes that until he made a committed effort to eliminate the thoughts and practices associated with deficit thinking, they were only perpetuating the achievement gap. He understands, upon reflection, how deficit thinking in public schools devastatingly contributes to social inequities.

Access to Programs

Sam is also very proud of the programs afforded students from diverse backgrounds. The program offerings at Brook Hills are informed by students’ interests and needs; it provides a place of belonging for each student. “We pride ourselves on providing opportunities for students to feel validated for their interests and experiences,” Sam shares. He is very proud of the leadership programs afforded students based on cultural and gender lines. He realizes that without specific outlets, those specific groups would not have the opportunities to emerge into the leaders they are today. “We’re getting better because we’re opening up opportunities and we’re letting the students lead us.”

More importantly, Sam recognizes that the offerings have impacted the graduation rate at Brook Hills. “Within the last 4 years, we went from a dropout rate of probably 10% or so to less than one half of 1%.” Sam is very confident in these findings, indicting “there are no other options out there for them to be successful.” Finding a place for every student to feel validated continues to be a priority in working to eliminate deficit thinking.

Case #2: Conclusion

Sam is committed to improving the academic outcome of every student, and he recognizes that their success is based on more than content. Sam specifically tries to create an environment where each student's lived experience and voice is met with the opportunities and the support to succeed. Whether it be access to an enriching environment, structured dialogue with others, or filling the classroom with personnel that have relevant life experiences, his strategies to address deficit thinking validate the efforts of every stakeholder.

Sam works diligently with teachers to change their mindset from one of deficit thinking to one of inspiring thinking. In his ideal world, every teacher would walk into the classroom and address students accordingly: "We're going to be together for nine months, at least—and we're going to find some success." He strives to get people to recognize how precious education is and to truly appreciate the impact of the work educators do every day. His biggest challenge now

is getting teachers to really take kids to the next level and not just go through the same motions in the same structures they have always used to get the same results—we want better results with more inspiring teachers who can look beyond the differences and see the possibilities.

Sam is willing to accept the challenges because they provide a platform for renewal.

In accelerating to the next level, Sam continues to personalize the challenges for staff in his pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking. He is adamant about encouraging staff to walk in the shoes of students, especially those who are excluded as a result of marginalization. Sam encourages teachers to better understand student perspectives. His relentless pursuit of an equitable learning environment for all helps him look beyond the challenges and focus on the possibilities of Brook Hills.

Upon reflection of his efforts to eliminate deficit thinking, Sam shares, "I always bring it back to the question 'What's their true potential?'" Sam works to remind teachers and adults

that they are dealing with kids. Even at the high school level, students are only 14 to 18 years old. Sam recognizes that the academic piece is just a small part of what he is trying to accomplish. To him, eliminating deficit thinking is about setting the kids up to believe in themselves despite the perceived differences from the dominant cultural context.

They haven't lived life. They don't know what experiences are out there. They don't know what's ahead of them. We can do our best to help predict that and tell them, and unfortunately many times we just tell them, you know, this is what you're going to encounter. They won't know it until they really live it. But what they need to know is when they do live it, when they do face challenges, when they do come across something that they've never encountered before, that they're going to be able to get through it.

Teenagers don't have the coping mechanisms just yet, and we sometimes forget that. Sam is cognizant that the rigorous opportunities they provide students who are marginalized can create challenges to the students, but the support structures and actual belief in them will help students who are marginalized succeed in the classroom. That, he shares, "is setting them up for life." Sam knows his approach presents a whole different experience for students who are marginalized, and he is fine with that because it allows them to continue to build the capacity for themselves in their efforts to eliminate deficit thinking.

In chapter V, the two cases are discussed in a cross-case analysis. The dominant theme focuses on deliberate dialogue as a tool to eliminate deficit thinking. Deliberate dialogue was found to be an emergent theme used by both principals to change deficit thinking practices to foster a more equitable environment. Although each principal employs dialogue as a tool to eliminate deficit thinking, each approaches dialogue through a different lens dependent on the individual's personal experience with marginalizing practices.

Chapter V

Deliberate Dialogue for an Equitable Education

As a school leader, it is easy to claim to be an advocate for students who are marginalized, but the reality is that deficit thinking is so ingrained in many educators and administrators that it persists and is perpetuated unknowingly in the actions and words that transpire in schools every day. Claiming to be an advocate requires a deliberate commitment to challenge the practices and beliefs that marginalize students. As Valencia purports (1997a), deficit thinking practices and beliefs have been embedded in school structures since the nation's inception. Therefore, eradicating these negative and preconceived notions of student abilities becomes the foundational work of a school leader who works diligently to eliminate deficit thinking. It requires the moral courage of a transformative leader (Shields, 2010; Weiner 2003).

The cases in this study presented a range of understandings and strategies. In some situations, the principals posited similar strategies; in others, a strategy was unique to the individual case. Some of the themes were expected, but some were not anticipated. Expected themes that were explored in the previous chapter included fostering positive relationships with stakeholders, providing structured and sustained professional development, and providing a rigorous learning environment for every student. The most prevalent and unanticipated theme was the notion of dialogue as a critical process to eliminate deficit thinking.

This chapter explores those concepts in a cross-case analysis under the umbrella of a democratic education. Specific strategies were cross-examined through the tools of agency, community, and social justice. The goals of a deep democracy and academic excellence were also used to examine the strategies of each principal. In this sense, a democratic education is an education that is equitable to every student, especially the marginalized. This chapter also

explores some of the unanticipated findings of the study. Specifically, deliberate dialogue was the primary unanticipated theme to be explored here through a cross-case analysis.

A Cross-Case Analysis: Deliberate Dialogue

The most prevalent theme that emerged in this study was dialogue, or more specifically, deliberate dialogue regarding stakeholders who are traditionally marginalized. Sam and Leigh used deliberate dialogue to create an inclusive community in each of their buildings; however, their lenses and contexts differed (Table 11). Leigh used deliberate dialogue through a critical lens to debate existing practices that marginalize students and challenge status quo. Her focus validated the lived experiences of marginalized parents and students. Sam used deliberate dialogue through a reflective lens to help teachers understand the importance of creating space for students who are marginalized. This section explores the notion of deliberate dialogue as a critical tool for change.

Table 12

Deliberate Dialogue to Eliminate Deficit Thinking

Principal	Purpose	Dialogic lens	Personalizing context
Leigh	Inclusive community	Critical ^a	Validate lived experiences of teachers and students
Sam	Inclusive community	Reflective	Create space for marginalized students

^aThe use of the term *critical* is often used in education research with a specific reference to the marginalized and less advantaged. In this section, critical is used to reference the manner in which the principal addressed the marginalizing practices of stakeholders.

Deliberate Dialogue as a Critical Tool for Change

Dialogue meant different things to each principal, but it is the foundation of Leigh and Sam’s pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking. Both Leigh and Sam used deliberate dialogue in leading stakeholders to recognize marginalizing practices, deconstruct them, and rebuild their culture with a more equitable structure that fosters a more inclusive community. Leigh used it to

validate the lived experiences of stakeholders and to challenge status quo (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Bishop, Berryman & Richardson, 2002; Delpit, 1995), and Sam used it create space for students who are marginalized (Moller, 2006; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1995).

In essence, they shifted the existing school paradigm by challenging the mindset of educators and the structures that perpetuated deficit thinking to bring about a democratic process of education. When leaders foster a democratic education that allows teachers to create contexts for learning constructed within discourses that reject deficit thinking, all students—and especially marginalized students—will be able to achieve academic excellence (Shields et al., 2004). Through dialogue, each principal inspired stakeholders to personalize the experience of students to embrace a more inclusive community absent of deficit thinking.

Dialogue as a Tool to Validate Lived Experiences

In the first case, Leigh used dialogue to foster an inclusive environment for all stakeholders. Capper (1993) found that principals who worked to change the culture of a building advocated and established a school wide vision of (a) eliminating discrimination, inequity, and exclusion; and (b) fostering the success of all students, in part by explicitly recognizing and affirming traditionally marginalized groups. Leigh approached dialogue with a critical lens to challenge the mindset of stakeholders as it relates to school practices that marginalize student groups. The use of the term *critical* as in *critical theory* is often used in qualitative research with specific reference to understanding and overcoming the marginalization of people based on their race, class, and gender (Creswell, 2009). In this section, critical is used to reference the manner in which Leigh addressed the marginalizing practices of stakeholders.

Critical in this context entails honest feedback that challenges the actions and beliefs of stakeholders with the intention of improving the circumstances of students who are marginalized.

Of significant importance is Leigh's use of honesty in dialogue with teachers. She shared, "Dialogue takes place in everything we do, and although we should not control every conversation, it is important to be honest and keep the focus on the student as central to the conversation." More importantly, she felt the conversations needed to address notions of deficit thinking, and she needed to keep challenging staff on the prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes that they bring to the classroom. She did not feel any of her teachers were poor instructors, but she recognized that they were not fully aware of deficit practices. "Their own experiences dictate that it is acceptable to hold lower expectations for some students," but she realized those lowered expectations were usually subjecting "our marginalized students to a less rigorous education and fewer culturally enriching opportunities." Leigh recognized that if she was not having the critical conversations with teachers, she was contributing to a culture that allowed marginalized students to struggle and fail academically. She found that critical conversations have helped teachers come to realize their own debilitating expectations and they "are a critical part of the process."

Dialogue as a Tool to Create Space

While Leigh used dialogue to deliberately critique and challenge the actions of teachers that employ deficit thinking practices, Sam used dialogue to help teachers understand why certain actions were characteristic of deficit thinking. Sam used dialogue to build a community of self-reflection. As opposed to critiquing marginalizing school practices, Sam used dialogue to raise questions for staff to help them recognize their own marginalizing practices in the building to create space for students who are marginalized.

Sam employed a dialogic lens to help stakeholders relate to student perspectives. He was adamant about the approach to the extent that it became a critical part of his hiring process. Sam appreciated teacher candidates who could demonstrate an ability to reflect on their own life challenges and pinpoint the time and place in which a teacher or another adult helped the candidate through the process. Building a culture of reflection to foster empathy and understanding for every student, especially the marginalized emerged as Sam's primary mission as a leader to eliminate deficit thinking.

As an example of reflective dialogue, Sam helped staff walk in the shoes of students by personalizing critical situations for teachers. "Many times I talk with teachers about their frustration with a student. Unfortunately, they too often feel the best solution is to drop a kid, change instructors, or put him in a lower track, and I say let's think about this," Sam shared. If the situation was turned and Sam was the perceived authoritative figure, the teacher's expectation changed. According to Sam, the typical response was "Well, I'd want you to be calm, want you to be poised, want you to work with me, want you to ask me questions and I'd want you to help me." This is the type of reflective response Sam strived to encourage in teachers.

Sam reminded staff that their reflective insight and response are "exactly what kids want." "I look at teachers in these situations and I think of a time when they struggled," Sam shared. He insisted he often reminds teachers to consider when they were novice and struggled with situations. "What would you have done during that time if I had given up on you because I did not think you could do it?" Normally, Sam recalled, "the teacher looked at me with shock." Sam added that the ensuing dialogue helped teachers reflect on those times to better realize that students just need support. "Some students will need more support than others and all students

will need different support at different times,” he shared. “Support is a part of the learning process for staff and students.” Once staff started to reflect on that notion, Sam found that they were more willing to try new things to help students succeed.

Concluding Thoughts on Deliberate Dialogue

Both cases used deliberate dialogue in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking, but their dialogical lenses differed. Perhaps the reason for their approaches is due to the nature of their personal attachment to deficit thinking. Leigh is concerned about the future of her own child who will require special accommodations. She will rely on the education structure and inclusive practices to provide the needs for him. The personalized expectations of her child leads to her critical approach when she sees teachers failing the students at Jackson Middle School. Sam spoke of his childhood poverty and his feelings of marginalization in his efforts to personalize the situation for staff. As a result of his experiences, he helped teachers use reflective thought when confronted with students with seemingly deficient backgrounds. In either case, personalizing the situation for staff through deliberate dialogue was a dominant approach to eliminating deficit thinking.

A Cross-Case Analysis: Repositioning the Self to Foster Equity

The second part of this chapter explores the notion of providing an equitable education with a re-positioning of the self. In order to change the culture of a building, school leaders must work to reframe concepts that have been identified with eliminating deficit thinking. Working toward a framework for a democratic education, Shields et al. (2004) discussed the notion of re-positioning the self to eliminate the practices associated with deficit thinking. Based on the framework as discussed in chapter 2 (Figure 1), the concepts of agency, community, social

justice, deep democracy, and academic excellence were utilized to analyze the practices employed by each principal to provide an equitable education for students who are marginalized.

Both principals employed strategies in an effort to eliminate deficit thinking. In their efforts, they moved to validate the lived experiences of marginalized stakeholders through a repositioning of the self. Shields et al. (2004) discussed the notion of repositioning the self to eliminate the practices associated with deficit thinking. Their efforts were based in the notion of providing an equitable education in which “all stakeholders, inclusive of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, engage in an ongoing decision-making dialogue regarding the learning community in which they are actors” (Møller, 2006). Leigh and Sam brought “a democratic approach to their buildings as a way of life that breaks sharply from the past” (Bode, 1937). They worked to create a culture that “understands minority students will perform better and have more rewarding school experiences when they are in a school environment that is sensitive to their culture and experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

By fostering an equitable approach to educational leadership, they provided a more equitable education to students. In this regard, students who are marginalized received the same access and opportunities as those of their non-marginalized peers. The specific practices they employed to eliminate deficit thinking are cross-examined in the next section. Guided by the conceptual framework (see Figure 2), the cases were cross-examined through the tools of agency, community, and social justice with a focus on the goal of deep democracy and academic excellence (Shields et al., 2004).

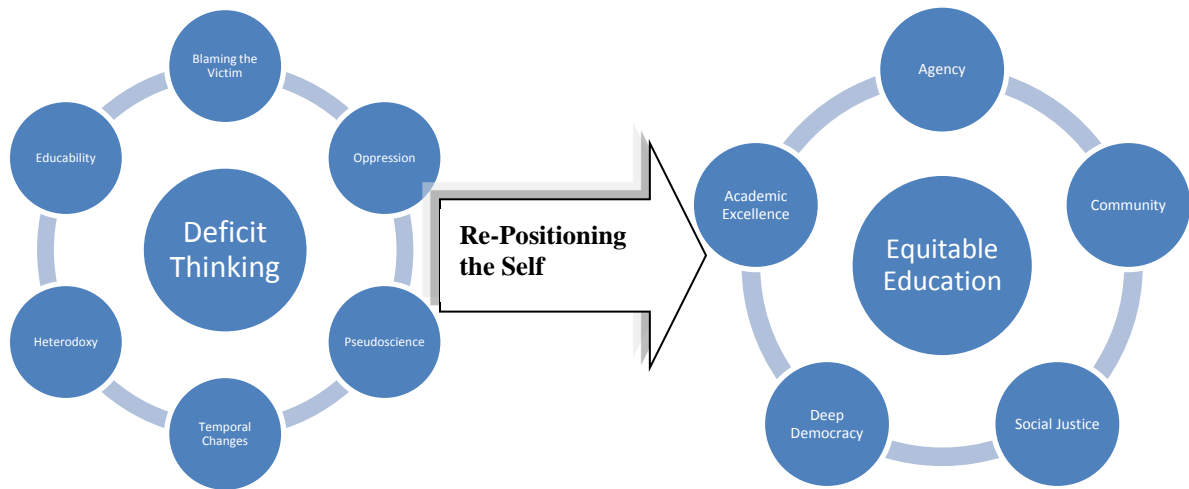


Figure 2. The role of a principal is to help educators overcome deficit thinking by re-positioning the self to promote practices that foster an equitable education.

Agency as a Tool for Balancing Power

Agency refers to the notion of validation despite being empowered. In this study, agency was used to highlight the notion that students who are marginalized need to learn to be empowered as a result of the shifting or sharing of power structures that existed in the building. As demonstrated in each case, the experiences and interactions of all stakeholders at Jackson Middle School and Brook Hills High School contributed significantly to the marginalization of students of culturally and linguistically different backgrounds and those from families of low socio-economic status. As Valencia (1997) posited, these experiences are generational and create a greater challenge for agents of change to overcome. In an effort to eliminate deficit thinking, Leigh and Sam used deliberate dialogue to address the inequalities created by power imbalances.

Notable in the two cases was the identification of marginalizing practices that silenced the voice of specific stakeholder groups from the dominant discourse. Ogbu (1992) found that when students are alienated by the dominant discourse, when the prevailing norms and customs

fail to relate to their lived cultural experiences, they tend to create their own set of rules and establish their own identity. As a response in each case, the two principals employed specific strategies to help bring a power balance to the lived cultural experiences of the dominant discourse and that of the marginalized stakeholders.

Agency acknowledges marginalizing practices, intends to change it, and creates a commitment to make choices that are mutually beneficial to the dominant and empowered. The strategies employed by Sam and Leigh allow the marginalized to create space for themselves and validate their lived experiences. The changes began with the knowledge and experiences of the marginalized. It refuted what was presumed from the dominant context and reconstructed it with a deliberate and shared understanding of marginalizing practices. Agency informed the process from the lens of all stakeholders, especially the parents and students.

To bring a voice to parents of marginalized groups, Leigh initiated a program to make home visits to parents who are traditionally left out of the education process. Pecked by the curiosity of their silence, she embarked on the initiative to hear their voices. What she discovered were warm and welcoming family structures with people that valued the education process. Although the parents overwhelmingly shared a desire to participate in the education of their children, their daily realities often prevented that. For many parents, evening jobs, linguistic differences, and fear of the school culture deterred them from becoming involved. Additionally, many of the parents she visited were either first-generation, limited English speaking, or poorly educated. Her home visits brought to light shared feels of insecurity when it came to getting involved in their child's education beyond trying to provide limited help on homework assignments.

As a result, Leigh employed the home visit program in which she and personnel from student services made quarterly home visits to parents who were unable or unwilling to partake in school functions. To create agency for these families in the dominant discourse, Leigh continually shared their thoughts and concerns with the staff and the school improvement team. Leigh related the lived experiences of marginalized group to stakeholders in the dominant discourse to help balance the power struggle. Eventually, these parents became involved in the conversations and school functions, resulting in the development of their own agency. As a consequence, stakeholders involved in the school and decision-making processes were exposed to the voice of the marginalized. Their own agency became informed by the voices of the marginalized. Brown (2006) finds that as stakeholders grow in a realization of their own agency, they increase their commitment and ability to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups. As a consequence, staff is more cognizant of the lived experiences of the families in which they serve.

Part of Sam's mission was to validate the lived experiences of those that are underserved and underrepresented in the context of the daily school culture. To help eliminate this practice, Sam brought a voice to students who are marginalized by creating space for them through extra-curricular groups. Through deliberate dialogue with students, Sam recognized that there were segments of the student body that felt there is no space for them. Sam created space by working with staff and leading them in reflective dialogue about what it means to feel silenced. As staff members become cognizant on the importance of the voice they have in the decisions made about the school, they worked more diligently with Sam to create space for every student.

As a result, the conversations created agency for several marginalized groups. It led to the creation of the Latina Girls Organization and the African American Leadership Organization. In

the old context of the school, these student groups did not have access to the support and resources that group membership provided. More importantly, the experiences of these students are validated as they have a platform to share concerns regarding how they fit into the context of the school.

In order for a school leader to overcome power imbalances, the lived experiences of all students must be recognized and embraced. In both scenarios, Sam and Leigh used deliberate dialogue to create an opportunity for the lived experiences of specific marginalized groups to feel a part of the dominant discourse; their existence has been validated through agency.

Community as a Tool for Creating Inclusion

Buber (1939) posited that relationships are built through dialogue and trust. Unfortunately, the current education system fails to foster such relationships because of practices that prevent students who are marginalized from having access to the social and cultural capital of the dominant group. Foucault (1980) referred to the notion of power-knowledge in understanding how marginalized groups continue to lose in the academic battle because of their lack of knowledge about the dominant education discourse.

It becomes critical then that learning, like living, occurs in social groups, and groups with the power to build schools, develop curriculum, and influence pedagogies often seem oblivious to the ways in which schools perpetuate inequities (Shields et al., 2004). Unless all students feel like they belong to these social groups, that they are included in decisions that impact them, then they exist without a sense of community.

In both cases, Sam and Leigh worked to foster a sense of community by allowing all students access to an education that recognized and challenged inequities. In both schools, tracking was identified as a perpetuator of inequity, and thus a significant obstacle to community.

Tracking not only perpetuated the achievement gap between the dominant and marginalized groups, it also excluded students who are marginalized from the social and cultural capital of the dominant group.

Oakes (1995) and Farkas (2003) find there is an over-representation of minority and low socio-economic students in the traditional lower track of secondary school courses. Cummins (2001) finds that marginalized students are often underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement programs. Thus the conversations that take place in the honors and AP courses prohibit the voices and experiences of students who are marginalized. The end result is that it allows an exclusive group to perpetuate exclusive practices due to the exclusion of voices from marginalized groups. Marginalizing norms perpetuate themselves in a community that excludes difference.

Building a sense community by instilling inclusive practices was approached differently by each principal, although the results were similar. Eliminating tracking was the primary focus for each principal in an effort to foster community. For Leigh, community meant she had to engage staff and parents in deficit thinking practices that excluded some students from culturally enriching courses of study. For Sam, it meant working closely with the central administration to provide access to more enriching courses where critical conversations transpired regularly.

At Jackson Middle School, creating inclusion started with the elective classes. Leigh used deliberate dialogue to challenge the policies and procedures that prevented some students from having the same access to the elective classes. After some debate with staff and parents regarding the alienation of marginalized groups from culturally enriching experiences, access was made possible. As discussed in chapter 4, the stigma of the purple team was eliminated and replaced with a more equitable process that afforded every student the opportunity to take the same

enriching courses. More importantly, every student received the opportunity to engage in conversations regarding the dominant discourse just by being in the same classes. The inclusive practices allowed every voice to exist when community became reality.

For Sam, inclusive practices began by working with the central office administration, staff, and parents to help eliminate the tracking system at Brook Hills. Through the use of deliberate dialogue, Sam helped stakeholders recognize that tracking prevented some students from having access to more rigorous courses. As Sam shared, the rigor is in large part connected to the dialogue that transpired in those courses. Sam found that the higher the level of course, the more critical and engaging the conversations were between the staff and students. “Without the access,” Sam shared, “There is no opportunity for some of our minority students to engage in those critical conversations.” Marginalized groups are now included in the critical conversations that foster a truer sense of community.

Sam used the same approach to challenge the deficit thinking of teachers in regards to the foreign language and English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Teachers debated access policies to the AP-bound Native Spanish courses and the assumptions regarding which students were qualified to take ESL. After much intense debate with teachers regarding the issues, he reiterated to all that the existence of the education system is to provide each student with an equal and equitable education. Although he provided room for each philosophy to be voiced, he brought it back to what is best for students. His reflective approach allowed for equal deliberation before decisions were made.

Deficit thinking results in the exclusion of students from the dominant discourse as they relate to tracking, thereby preventing the growth of community (Schofield, 2010; Chambers, 2009). Sam and Leigh used deliberate dialogue to challenge the status quo of tracking. Hall

(1997) contended that schools have to do more than negotiate; they have to negotiate with purpose. In both cases, Sam and Leigh specifically negotiated the impact of tracking on marginalized groups. Their approach created a community of inclusion in the dominant discourse.

Social Justice as a Tool of Validation

Social justice is the fostering of practices that invites stakeholders to empathize with and experience the world through the eyes of the marginalized, bringing forth equitable practices (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2004; Kose & Shields, 2009). Ideally, students of social justice enter the world with a lens for equity and equality. An education based in social justice can break the perpetuation of deficit thinking for educators and the students they impact.

Social Justice requires inclusive and equitable practices that allow for the embracing of conversations that create a shared understanding about student differences. It fosters a culture that invites all stakeholders to empathize with and experience the world through the eyes of the marginalized. Unfortunately, deficit thinking prohibits a democratic community as it recycles preconceived notions about the limited abilities of students who are marginalized. Validating the lived experiences of students who are marginalized through a social justice lens is critical in eliminating deficit thinking.

Deficit thinking aligns with the notion that the dominant discourse is the only discourse that exists in schools' structures. It posits that experiences and values that do not fit the mold of the dominant group are presumed deficient. Until the experiences and values of students who are marginalized are provided with space to exist, their lived realities will not be validated.

Through deliberate dialogue, both principals validated the lived realities of students who are marginalized. For Leigh, validating lived experiences came through the form of the advisory

class. More specifically, she created structured and sustained platforms for students and staff to engage in conversations regarding topics that have traditionally been pathologized. Sam validates the lived experiences of students through his hiring practices. In the process, he gauges potential teachers on their ability to connect with real life experiences I which the odds were against them, but they were able to overcome with guidance from adults. He is able to engage in deliberate dialogue with newly hired teachers when they come across struggles with students of different contexts than their own. Sam and Leigh use deliberate dialogue differently in order to validate the lived realities of students.

At Jackson Middle school, advisory changed from information sharing to deliberate dialogue. Advisory topics are driven by students and facilitated by teachers in an attempt to shed light on some of the traditionally pathologized topics such as racism, homelessness, and homosexuality. Advisory classes act as platforms for students to engage in deliberate dialogue regarding matters that impact students, especially those from marginalized groups.

In one such example, Muslim students shared concerns with Leigh regarding comments from other students alluding to their association with terrorism. The ensuing dialogue with staff regarding the prevalence of such racist comments substantiated the concerns. As a result, the following topics at the weekly advisories were guided by these concerns. In the past, such conversations would have been avoided because of the comfort level with sensitive topics. It was easier to ignore them than to address them. To help overcome pathologizing practices, advisories have created space for stakeholders to deliberately discuss sensitive topics.

Sam used deliberate dialogue in his hiring process to gauge how well potential hires can experience the world in the shoes of the marginalized. Throughout the interview, Sam shared his childhood experience of poverty, and he used that experience to see the world through the eyes

of students who are marginalized. He used the same reflective approach in hiring practices to surround his students with staff who can empathize with and validate their experiences. As Sam shared, he looked for candidates who had overcome challenges associated with non-dominant contexts, and can use that experience to address the needs of students who are marginalized.

Ogbu (1992) finds that when students who are marginalized feel inadequate or find that their experiences do not mesh with that of the dominant culture, there becomes a need to create an identity that validates their experience. Unfortunately, these alternatives often contradict those of the dominant culture and lend themselves to a belief that they cannot be both academically successful and different (Ogbu, 1987). It becomes critical that schools create space for deliberate dialogue regarding the cultural, linguistic and socio-economical differences of group members. The opportunities for deliberate dialogue regarding these differences validated the lived experiences for students at Brook Hills High School and Jackson Middle School.

Deep Democracy as a Goal

Deep democracy provides a platform for all groups to have a chance to engage in the conversation; all stakeholders, even those of groups with small numbers, can debate the policies and practices of the system. In a deep democracy, conflict should be expected if pluralism and diversity are taken seriously for that will lead to the deliberation of voices (Green, 1999). In this study, a shared understanding was achieved by amplifying the voices of those who were excluded or marginalized even if verbal conflict led to such progress. In essence, deliberate dialogue was a welcomed and necessary part of their leadership to eliminate deficit thinking.

In both cases, Sam and Leigh fostered a deeply democratic approach to provide a voice to stakeholders who were traditionally left out of the conversation, but the areas of leadership where they were employed differ. Leigh used deep democracy as a tool to heighten the

awareness of classroom practices, and to help staff make sense of students' home-life factors. Sam used deep democracy to provide a voice to all stakeholders through his commissions. The commissions deliberately assembled groups of stakeholders that consisted of students and staff from various cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. The commissions were assembled to help bring a shared understanding to building concerns and they deliberated on solutions through the voices and perspectives of all. In both cases, the principal welcomed the opportunity to debate topics with stakeholders to build a shared understanding for the improvement of every student's academic experience.

As an example of deliberate dialogue, Leigh referenced her evaluation process. During walkthroughs and observations, Leigh made concerted efforts to "look for how much time the teacher is talking versus the student" and she "identifies the types of relationships that have been built" whether they are positive or negative. Leigh specifically looked for student engagement in her observations and the walk-through process for indications that student learning was occurring, and she used the ensuing dialogue to make light of situations where "Hispanic and Black students are not afforded the same quality of engagement that White students are getting." Having critical conversations with teachers and specifically addressing marginalized groups in those conversations is characteristic of Leigh's approach to use dialogue as a foundation to eliminate deficit thinking.

During one post-classroom observation, Leigh shared with the staff member that he teacher seemed to focus much of his attention on a specific group of students that were centered in the middle of the room. The teacher claimed it was because those students had his direct eye contact, and they were always willing to participate, and he wanted to debate that it was not a concern because every one of his students was still exposed to his instruction. Leigh asked the

instructor to keep a copy of his seating chart next to him during class sessions and place a mark next to each seat every time he engaged with that student. He did that for a week. When they met a week later, Leigh and the principal discussed the seating chart. “He was amazed at how much attention he was giving those students.” Leigh said she deliberately paused in the conversation and then asked, “And who then is not getting your attention?” Leigh walked the teacher through the conversation, helping him to realize that there was an overrepresentation of White students who received the majority of his attention, and there were a number of students from marginalized groups that did not get his attention as much. “He said that day that he gets it, and he was startled that it never occurred to him what he was doing,” she recalled.

In her pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking, Leigh also used home visits to carry the voices of marginalized parents to the decision-making realm. The School Improvement Team (SIT) met monthly to discuss pertinent issues in an effort to improve the academic setting for every student. Eventually, the home visits carried over to increased school contact and involvement in school activities by those parents. “Groups that were never represented before were getting actively involved,” Leigh shared. By bringing the voices of parents from the home visits and providing a place on the SIT for every stakeholder group, Leigh promoted a deep democracy.

Through interviews and observations, it became evident that the SIT meetings are more than an opportunity for Leigh to share information. They became the platform for intense debate regarding the practices that marginalize students and parents. It is through the process of deliberate debate about such topics that Leigh was able to promote a deep democracy at Jackson Middle School. Additionally, her weekly advisories and faculty meetings are more than information sharing sessions. The advisories and faculty meetings, like the SIT meetings,

provide a platform for deliberate debate in an effort to recognize and eliminate the deficit thinking practices that marginalize student groups.

In his pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking, Sam employed various strategies for stakeholders to engage in deliberate debate regarding marginalizing practices. Specifically, Sam created opportunities for a deep democracy through leadership groups that were specifically created for students who are marginalized. The purpose of the student groups was to create a platform for group members to discuss the marginalizing practices that limited their access and opportunity in the context of the dominant school culture. Sam used feedback from these conversations to help challenge the mindset of stakeholders who held true to deficit thinking practices. Most notably, his commissions highlighted his efforts to promote a deep democracy in the eradication of deficit thinking.

The purpose of Sam's commissions became evident through the interviews and observations. Recognizing the fact that large groups of students were continually coming to him regarding the atmosphere of the building, Sam knew something had to be done. In one example, the use of slang terminology and volume was of considerable concern to all stakeholder groups. In order to address this concern, Sam approached it through a deep democracy. He recognized that leaving the decision to the dominant discourse would have alienated many of the groups from the conversation. Eventually, the arguments involved in the process of setting boundaries led to a resolution, but more importantly, "it taught a lot of us about the importance of debating concerns to help understand others perspectives." The commission meets regularly to address any concerns that jeopardize the integrity of a culture that has fostered a space for everyone's cultural, linguistic and socio-economic experience.

The complexity of situations can never be truly understood until the voices of everyone involved are given due process. Deliberation afforded by a deep democracy provides opportunities for fundamental change that moves beyond “tinkering” to redress current practices and inequities (Shields et al., 2004). Sam and Leigh used opportunities for deliberation in regards to specific marginalizing practices. They are not deterred from using terminology that identifies specific groups in order to shed light on the people excluded from the dominant conversations and structural practices. Deliberation is one of their most aggressive strategies in their efforts to build a shared understanding and eliminate deficit thinking.

Academic Excellence as a Goal

Academic achievement is fundamentally tied to the expectations of students in the classroom. When the system tries to change the students, students remain marginalized no matter how much they adapt (Garza & Garza, 2010; Ryan, 1999). Therefore, teachers were the most significant stakeholders in Sam and Leigh’s quest to bring a more equitable education to every student. To address the mindset of teachers, Sam and Leigh relied on professional development opportunities to create space for deliberate dialogue to improve classroom practices.

Leigh adamantly shared that dialogue should be the premise of professional development opportunities. Professional development included faculty meetings, school improvement days, school leadership meetings, curriculum team meetings, and student advisory. She used e-mail as the context to relay information so she was able to maximize dialogue during every professional development opportunity. She strived to maximize dialogue during staff interactions.

When questioned about the importance of maximizing time for dialogue, Leigh shared that critical cannot come from the top. She recognized that democratic change had to come from within the mindset of the teachers. “If I was to solely rely on encouraging teachers to stop deficit

thinking and explain why it is wrong, they would say they would, but they really wouldn't know what that meant," Leigh shared. By providing ongoing opportunities to dialogue with staff and students, Leigh believed teachers built their own understanding of what deficit thinking looks like. "The change comes as teachers come to recognize their impact on student achievement, which is why I have to provide every opportunity I can for them to engage in critical conversations regarding marginalized students." Leigh worked to eliminate deficit thinking by working to change the culture in which staff debated. Critical conversation regarding students was expected, and Leigh provided that platform to help teachers meet the expectation.

Sam worked collaboratively with staff and students to challenge a culture that fostered deficit thinking. His use of reflective reasoning helped each stakeholder to gauge the perspectives of one another and understand how that impacted the environment for everyone. "Telling staff and students what they should do does not work," Sam shared. Instead, he invited them to consider the possibility of alternative approaches based on a new understanding, a new understanding that came through reflection.

During the interview, Sam repeatedly shared leadership stories about getting an individual to consider the perspectives of others. He was successful at this approach because he helped stakeholders recognize that their contextual experiences were neither the only nor correct perspective. Sam invited reflection to help teachers address the needs of struggling students, he used it to help new teachers make sense of students that they had trouble connecting with, and he used it to help parents make sense of some of the school practices that provided space for all interest groups even when the parent disagreed. Sam recognized that deficit thinking stems from contextual experiences, and merely telling someone their experiences were not effective was

ineffective. Helping others reflect on their perspectives and how their perspective impacted others was critical to his approach to eliminate deficit thinking.

Although their approaches differ, both Sam and Leigh challenged the mindsets of stakeholders in their efforts to promote academic excellence. If educators fail to act in the best interest of all students and do not accept the responsibility to better understand the lived experiences of those they teach, then achievement outcomes will continue to vary. Academic excellence is not about using positions of power to get teachers to do things differently. Sam and Leigh recognized that academic excellence is more than changing the curriculum and assessments; it is more than telling teachers and students what to do different or better. They maximize dialogic opportunities to positively impact the expectations of every stakeholder to bring about academic excellence for every student.

Conclusion

As addressed in chapter 2, deficit thinking is pervasive in the contemporary school structure. It exists in the beliefs of educators and it informs accepted school practices. Despite the level of prevalence, deficit thinking impacts every student. Through this cross-case analysis, I found that Leigh and Sam demonstrated an ability to address the practices and beliefs that perpetuate deficit thinking although their approaches and contexts differ. By using their role as the principal in each building to engage faculty and staff in reflection and dialogue, Sam and Leigh demonstrated an ability to foster a more democratic education with a shared goal to bring equity and equal access to every student. They operated as transformative leaders correlating social justice and democratic community with concepts of student learning (Furman, 2005).

Both relied primarily on deliberate dialogue in this endeavor, but the contexts differed in each case. Leigh focused on deliberate dialogue to help stakeholders understand the lived experiences of students while Sam used deliberate dialogue to create space for marginalized student groups. Additionally, both employed leadership tools in an effort to provide a democratic education. Although they consciously worked through agency, community, and social justice, the contexts of how they utilized each tools differed. In the end, their products were similar; both created a school environment that is deeply democratic and promotes academic excellence. Each environment is more inclusive of student and parent groups that were once marginalized by practices associated with deficit thinking.

Throughout the study, Leigh persistently considered herself one of many important players in the process, not the foundation for change. Her approach is reflective of a transformative leader. These actions are indicated by purposely situating herself in different seats during professional development opportunities, sitting silently in team meetings when there was meaningful debate occurring, and relying on other professionals from outside the building to lead in-services that she is capable of conducting herself. Leigh recognized that the commitment to create change for the betterment of every student is the responsibility of everyone.

These pillars are consistent with Weiner's (2003) definition of transformative leadership as an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy and dialogue. The result of transformative leadership is that every student, despite cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic indicators, is afforded an equitable education complete with the same access and privileges of students from non-marginalized groups. Although this has not been fully attained at Jackson Middle School, Leigh continues the process of bringing it to every student.

Sam used dialogue to lead from a reflective standpoint, often personalizing marginalizing practices for staff. His approach is more indirect with staff, as he empowered them to make light of their marginalizing practices. His approach allowed staff and students to recognize the shortcomings in their own actions to bring about more opportunities for students from every background.

Sam and Leigh recognized that schools tend to reflect the power structure of the society and that these power relations are directly relevant to educational outcomes (Cummins, 2001). Although deficit thinking is in large part a projection of people's own contextual experiences and are often unintentional, school leaders must help teachers recognize how their power, relationships, and interactions with marginalized students impact student learning (Shields et al., 2004). Deliberate dialogue is the common thread in leadership to eliminate deficit thinking, but the lens by which this occurs can differ, but it can differ effectively.

This chapter used a cross-case approach to examine the notion of deliberate dialogue and a democratic education as they pertain to the elimination of deficit thinking in two case studies. In the final chapter, the research question and sub-questions are addressed in an overview of the study's findings. It concludes by identifying lessons learned and related recommendations.

Chapter VI

Moving Beyond Deficit Thinking

More than anything else, I did not set out to explore what good principals do as building leaders because there are lots of good leaders with a plethora of effective leadership strategies at their helm. I set out to explore how school leaders achieve meaningful change. In this study, meaningful change in education posits two essentials: First, those in the dominant discourse need to reject deficit thinking. Second, the voices of the marginalized must be heard in order to create a shared understanding that promotes a deep democracy (Cummins, 2001; J. M. Green, 1999). My research was grounded in exploration and analysis to examine the efforts of school leaders who operate through a lens of social justice. More specifically, I set out to uncover school leadership through the lens of someone who works deliberately to eliminate deficit thinking.

Overview of the Study

The goal of this study was to examine how principals work to eliminate deficit thinking in secondary school settings. In order to build a common understanding of deficit thinking, I defined and used the term “marginalized” throughout the study to refer to students of culturally and linguistically different background and those from families of low socio-economic status (García & Guerra, 2004). This study began with the premise that students who are marginalized tend to be the victims of deficit thinking and continue to fall behind their more privileged peers in terms of achievement due to lowered teacher expectations, lack of access to rigorous programs, and limited opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. Too often, these shortcomings are a result of deficit thinking, and the student and his or her family and home life factors are often blamed for the deficits.

Chapter 2 traced the history of deficit thinking and its impact on education today.

According to Valencia (1997a) deficit thinking is an erroneous assumption that students who fail in school do so because of internal deficits including limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation, immoral behavior, and cultural differences. Educators too often cite the students' personal and home life factors as the cause of these perceived deficits. In short, teachers who practice through a lens of deficit thinking do not hold school structures and practices or their own pedagogical practices accountable for poor academic achievement. This is a crisis.

Cummins (2001) finds this "crisis" is an ongoing one: underachievement is concentrated among students who grow up in impoverished conditions and among groups such as African American, Latino/Latina, and Native American students. Deficit thinking results in school practices such as tracking, lack of cultural exposure, erroneous assumptions, labeling, and limited access to critical dialogue for students and families with marginalizing backgrounds and experiences. These practices were addressed in the study.

In the second part of Chapter 2, I explored a democratic education. Shields et al. (2004) find that when leaders engage stakeholders in dialogue inclusive of reflection and dialogue, it creates an opportunity for staff to reposition themselves. This allows the lived experiences of the traditionally marginalized to be equal players in educational reform, and a more democratic learning experience can ensue. Their research contends that a democratic education is built on reframing the notions of agency, community, social justice, deep democracy, and academic excellence. Taking such an approach deconstructs the education system and rebuilds it with a shared understanding between all stakeholder groups. With this lens, I researched principals who work from a democratic platform to eliminate deficit thinking in their buildings.

In Chapter 3, I provided my personal standpoint, ethical considerations, participant and site selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations for my methodology. The primary focus of this study was to examine the role principals play in eliminating deficit thinking. In order to find my cases, I employed a purposeful sampling approach to locate principals who are noted by their peers, university professors, and education experts to purposely employ strategies that address deficit thinking. Once I had identified my cases, I set out to address the following sub-questions:

1. How do secondary school principals define deficit thinking?
2. How do principals understand the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies do secondary school principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking?
4. What challenges do principals face in eliminating deficit thinking?
5. What do principals describe as the impact of eliminating deficit thinking?

Through a series of case interviews, anonymous teacher surveys, and observations, I examined the role of the principal in eliminating deficit thinking.

These findings are shared in the next section. They are followed by a discussion of specific strategies each principal used to address power balances that perpetuate practices associated with deficit thinking. I then discuss the impact of eliminating deficit thinking, and explore deliberate dialogue as a critical strategy. Next, I demonstrate how transformative leadership can be a means to foster equity (Kose & Shields, 2009; Shields & Furman, 2005; Weiner, 2003). I then make recommendations to school leaders who are struggling with deficit thinking practices that marginalize students. I encourage researchers to explore the notion of deliberate dialogue as a way to foster an equitable learning environment. Finally, I conclude the chapter by making recommendations for further study.

Findings of Study

In this section, I review the major findings in this study. First, I present the findings based on the research questions. I examine the role of the principal in defining deficit thinking, understanding the impact of deficit thinking, eliminating deficit thinking, overcoming challenges, and the impact of providing a democratic education. Then I present the overarching finding of deliberate dialogue.

Defining Deficit Thinking as Power Imbalances

In both cases, Sam and Leigh used similar terms regarding the definition of deficit thinking and the population that is negatively impacted by deficit thinking. Valencia (1997b) finds that educators have assumed that the failure of minority students can be naturally attributed to the students' racial or cultural inferiority, their language, low SES, their parents' low education, and their perceived lack of interest. In both interviews, the principal's definition of deficit thinking aligns with that used in research. Leigh and Sam used terms alluding to the notion that deficit thinking is a belief or assumption in which educators lay the blame for the academic failure of specific students on their personal life factors.

Both principals recognized that as a belief, deficit thinking exists squarely in the mind of the perpetrator, but neither the educator nor school practices are held accountable for the impact of deficit thinking. More specifically, both principals recognized that the students who are hurt by such beliefs are from marginalized groups—low income, and/or from culturally or linguistically different backgrounds.

According to Leigh, deficit thinking occurs “as a result of educators placing blame for low test scores or poor performance on students from poverty or minority students because

teachers believe that ‘these students’ or ‘those parents’ do not care about education.” In her response to the question, Leigh identified a specific segment of the student population as the victims of deficit thinking. She also indicated in her definition that the perceived reason for their academic failure is due to circumstances outside the control of the school. In essence, there is no accountability in her definition of deficit thinking.

Sam shared deficit thinking as:

The predetermined belief by a person of authority that a student can or cannot accomplish a task, grasp a concept, improve a skill, or otherwise achieve at a specific level as a result of the student’s prior performance, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or physical characteristics.

Like Leigh, Sam identified a specific segment of the population that is negatively impacted by such beliefs and that factors outside the control of the school cause the poor academic performance.

In both cases, the principals assert that there is a power imbalance that plays out in the situation. Leigh alludes to those who operate through a deficit thinking lens as stakeholders who blame the “underserved,” “from poverty” or a “minority.” Sam refers to those who operate through a deficit thinking lens as “person(s) of authority.” In both cases, the perpetrators of deficit thinking hold a position of assumed authority or privilege over those who are marginalized. Cummins (2001) contends that teachers do have power and influence in the current context to impact deficit thinking. What educators do with that power and influence is critical. School leaders need to take responsibility by addressing the issues of power and dominance that perpetuate deficit thinking (Foucault, 1980). Understanding this power imbalance is critical in eliminating deficit thinking.

Understanding Deficit Thinking as Prejudices

Understanding deficit thinking requires that a person can not only define the term, but is able to identify how it marginalizes students. Each principal shared their perspective on how they came to identify and understand the impact of deficit thinking in each of their buildings. Each identifies that the deficit assumptions stakeholders bring to their buildings are “misperceived” or “misguided.” In essence, educators bring assumptions or prejudices to the classroom that they are not always aware exist.

For Leigh, practices associated with deficit thinking became apparent within her first few weeks at Jackson Middle School. What she came to understand about deficit thinking was that assumptions stakeholders made about students transcended the community and impacted the way students were perceived by teachers and themselves.

Leigh came to understand the impact of deficit thinking through various meetings with staff and parents. She had learned that a sense of entitlement existed for students who were assigned to a specific team through the scheduling process. Assumptions were made about students on the different teams, and those assumptions carried into the community. It resulted in parents requesting Leigh to move their students to the “more academically gifted team” because of the negative association with the other two teams.

What Leigh learned was there was a misperception about the academic program and academic achievement of each team. The misperception arose due to the nature of scheduling. To accommodate scheduling requests, students who took band class and subsequently played for the school were tracked together on the same team. This resulted in a sense of entitlement for band parents because many of these students came from higher socio-economic backgrounds due to the fact they were able to afford lessons and instruments. The other teams performed similarly in

terms of academic achievement, but the sense of entitlement with the band team resulted in deficit perceptions of the other teams. The biggest impact of these assumptions, according to Leigh, was that students on the other two teams felt inferior because of the prestige associated with the “elite” team.

Sam understands deficit thinking as “the conversations and concerns” of staff members regarding the assumed limitations of students. He shared “there’s a misperception still amongst our staff that students from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds are not able to succeed in ‘our’ structure.” He recognized that such thoughts had a trickle-down effect on students who are marginalized. Such assumptions prohibited marginalized groups from having access to certain courses, it prohibited marginalized groups from fostering leadership abilities, and it prohibited marginalized groups from engaging in conversations associated with the dominant context.

Sam believes the root of deficit thinking exists with the different contextual backgrounds of students and staff. Therefore, he had to push his staff to embrace changes to tracking to allow students who are marginalized access to AP courses. He had to convince the board and superintendent to create space for marginalized groups by creating extra-curricular groups that foster leadership skills. Both of these initiatives created opportunities for marginalized groups to engage in conversations with the dominant context. Without the space, Sam recognized that deficit thinking limited the potential of students who are marginalized. In every sense, Sam recognized that deficit thinking prevented access to an equal and equitable opportunity to improve the quality of life for students who are marginalized.

In both cases, understanding deficit thinking required the ability of the school leaders to recognize assumptions and prejudices. Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998) suggested the cause of

deficit thinking lay with teachers and administrators who overtly or subtly allowed prejudices and assumptions to infiltrate their interactions and expectations with students who are marginalized, thereby limiting the opportunities of minority and low-income students. Sam and Leigh understood the assumptions and prejudices of stakeholders and how it negatively impacted students. Understanding allowed the principals to employ strategies that helped to eliminate the practices associated with deficit thinking.

Strategies to Shift the Balance of Power

The strategies that the school leaders used to address deficit thinking are discussed in this section. Some of the strategies presented here were uncovered in both schools. Other findings presented here emerged in only one case. It is not to say that the practices do not exist in both cases, but through my research, they did not emerge as such. In each of the following summaries, the outcome of the strategy addressed the notions of power balances as discussed in the first section on defining deficit thinking. Each strategy afforded students who are marginalized a space in the dominate context of schooling.

Dialogue

Both cases relied on dialogue as a tool to address deficit thinking. In one case, dialogue was considered the premise of eliminating deficit thinking. At Jackson Middle School, dialogue is constantly used with all stakeholders and in various contexts to address assumptions, validate concerns, build empathy, and track student progress. At Brook Hills High School, dialogue was used primarily with staff and students to help create space and develop a culture of tolerance. The common strand between the two buildings is that dialogue regarding marginalizing practices is constant and structured, and it fosters an inclusive community that develops some criteria

against which to judge decisions to guide their actions and dialogue (Shields et al., 2004). The use of dialogue as a deliberate tool was an emergent theme that will be explored in the next section.

Parental Involvement

Although both cases referenced parents as part of their daily routine, one case clearly referred to parents as a critical part of the process of eliminating deficit thinking. At Jackson Middle School, parents were a major part of the decision making process, but more importantly, parental relationships were a critical part of the principal's strategy to eliminate deficit thinking. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olsen (2006) posited that parents were a critical part of the impacting the future of a culture when they came to understand the self through engaging with the school. This was evident at Jackson Middle School.

First, parents were a part of the decision-making process and therefore their perspectives were taken into account to be sure all stakeholders were involved in a shared decision-making approach. From a social justice lens, parents were strongly encouraged to be a part of the process to help eliminate the notion that parents in the building do not care. The continuous reliance on parents empowered them as a stakeholder group, allowed an important stakeholder group to have a voice, and provided a platform to help eliminate the deficit thoughts that parents do not care.

Professional Development

The area of professional development was noted in both schools as an instrumental tool in the approach to eliminate deficit thinking. Professional development is vital to improving the learning and achievement of students (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). More specifically, Shields et al. (2009) recognized the need for professional development that enhances teachers' abilities to work with diverse students who differ by race, ethnicity, gender,

sexual orientation, language, ability or socioeconomic status. Both principals use professional development as a means to eliminate deficit thinking.

In the first case, Leigh used professional development as a platform for dialogue. The learning that occurred during professional development emerged from conversations between staff regarding the marginalizing practices that negatively impacted students. In the second case, Sam primarily used professional development to foster a peer-coaching culture that impacted student achievement. In it, he continually referenced the importance of differentiated instruction as it pertained to students who are marginalized who had been alienated in the classroom by the dominant learning context.

Access

In both cases, access to more rigorous programs and enriching experiences was a critical part of the strategies employed to eliminate deficit thinking. In both cases, the elimination of tracking was a major challenge that had been overcome in both cases. Although segregation is outlawed, here I found it takes the form of tracking. This is noted by researchers as a “second generation” of segregation that occurs within schools (Mickelson, 2001). Mickelson finds his segregation results from homogeneous grouping practices commonly known as tracking and ability grouping. Providing traditionally marginalized students access to honors and gifted programs that have traditionally excluded them because of deficit thinking practices is yet another action a leader for a democratic education can instill (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002).

Affording students the access to more rigorous courses allowed students who were marginalized to partake in the dominant discourse that took place in more rigorous classrooms where student expectations were found to be higher than lower level courses. Houston (2003)

found that schools may go as far as providing equal opportunities, but the reality is that the access to such opportunities is quite inequitable. The access afforded students who were marginalized at Jackson Middle School and Brook hills High School exposed them to the cultural capital of dominate discourse while simultaneously exposing students in the dominant discourse to the discourse of students who are marginalized.

Personnel

For both principals, personnel decisions were critical to their efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. In the first case, decisions regarding personnel were made in a reactive measure; in the other case, personnel decisions were made proactively. In either case, the principal made deliberate decisions that impacted his or her efforts to address and eliminate practices associated with deficit thinking. According to Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999), the single most important factor in the academic achievement of minority students is the explicit rejection of deficit thinking by the school-based administrator. Both principals addressed personnel with the notion of eradicating practices associated with deficit thinking.

In the first case, Leigh referenced the walkthrough and evaluation process in an effort to continually improve instructional delivery. In that case, deliberate conversations took place between Leigh and the teacher regarding the interactions that were observed. The conversations centered on interactions between the teacher and students of marginalized groups, the level of those conversations, and the perceived expectations of students who are marginalized. In the second case, Sam referenced the importance of hiring as a strategy to eliminate deficit thinking. Much effort was put into hiring candidates that had empathy for the experiences of students who are marginalized. Emphasis was placed on candidates who were able to personalize the lived experiences of students who are marginalized.

Homework

The notion of homework occurred in only one case, but it was emphasized throughout the study. Homework was noted as a finding because of a heightened level of awareness that it is tied to behavior. Leigh recognized that the lived realities of students created unrealistic expectations for homework as many students have to play roles other than student after the school day has ended. Leigh realized that many students had to care for the family after school, and/or they did not have access to the resources or support to complete rigorous homework assignments.

Ogbu (1987) found that such a contradiction between the realities of marginalized students and the expectations of the dominant culture fostered a belief in the student that he or she cannot be both academically successful and different. As a result, many marginalized students failed academically because of the emphasis of homework as part of the final grade. Deficit thinking practices laid the blame for failing on the students' home life factors, but Leigh realized it had nothing to do with their ability; it had everything to do with their reality.

Challenges of Conflicting Cultures

In both cases, Sam and Leigh identified a major challenge in their pursuit to eliminate deficit thinking. They cited the entrenched dominant culture as a significant challenge in overcoming deficit thinking. They also recognized change did not come easily. Their notion is supported by Pearl (2010) who found a democratic education is a replacement for deficit thinking; however, it requires a change in culture that will take time.

Sam and Leigh found that they needed to help stakeholders overcome an entrenched culture where deficit thinking was rampant. At Jackson Middle School, Leigh recognized the need to get stakeholders to “focus on the whole child as an individual” because every child is

different. To her, deficit thinking existed because teachers believed the “old, entrenched culture” is best for every student. At Brook Hills High School, Sam recognized the entrenched culture was a challenge “because the assumption of staff is that if kids are struggling in school, it’s because they can’t do it.” According to Sam, deficit thinking existed because teachers accepted that there was nothing that could be done for the student.

Impact of Eliminating Deficit Thinking

The impact of the efforts to eliminate deficit thinking did not go unnoticed. Both leaders presented findings indicative of progress. Leigh noted an increase in dialogue regarding students who are marginalized. Sam spoke of AP test scores and their observations of staff interactions. Both indicators underscored their efforts to eliminate deficit thinking.

At Jackson Middle School, Leigh recognized that staff interactions at meetings now revolve around student potential. In the past, she noted that much of the past dialogue addressed student shortcomings and concluded with assumptions that nothing could be done about the student. Using dialogue as the foundation of community fosters an inclusive school community that is deeply democratic, equitable, and treats individuals with “absolute regard” (Starratt, 1991). Based on observations and the anonymous teacher surveyed that was administered to staff as part of the study, staff recognized the potential of each student despite differences. The commitment of the principal to encourage structured and sustained dialogue regarding students who are marginalized promotes an equitable education. The approach is supported by the notion that inclusive leadership practices show more promise, are more communal, and foster dialogue that will help, rather than hinder opportunities and life chances of marginalized groups (Starratt, 1991).

At Brook Hills High School, Sam recognized that student achievement scores have fared much better than teachers had predicted when he eliminated tracking and promoted AP enrollment. He specifically stated that the percentage of students passing the AP exam had not fallen as a result of more students gaining access to the AP program. He also noted his school made adequate yearly progress two years in a row on the state assessment. Sam credited this to the access students have been granted in terms of rigor. As a consequence, the overall expectations of students have risen with the elimination of basic tracks and the lowered expectations associated with them. Although research suggested the disadvantages of tracking are most detrimental to minority students (Farkas, 2003; Oakes, 1995) because of the imbalance of minority students in the lowest academic track (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999), there is little research exploring that providing access to AP and other rigorous courses can increase the academic performance of lower tracked students.

Deliberate Dialogue and Contextual Experience

In this section, I share the overarching finding of the study. Through a cross-case analysis, the importance of dialogue, specifically dialogue that is structured and purposeful, emerged as a critical tool in the efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. Deliberate dialogue is the primary strategy used in both cases to foster an inclusive community that eliminated deficit thinking, but the lens in which it was delivered differed depending on the contextual experience of each principal.

Although dialogue was not originally included in my literature review, it emerged in my findings as a prevalent theme and therefore warranted a literature review. Dialogue is the crux of democratic leadership that works to eliminate deficit thinking. Through dialogue, we create

space for marginalized groups, and we learn about their lived experiences. This informed understanding fosters relationships and community, two critical components of a democratic education that works to eliminate deficit thinking.

According to Shields (2009) dialogue is the very act of developing relationships with other people and with the subject matter itself...to promote reflection, critical analysis, and ultimately, democratic action (p. 159). It allows for a truer sense of community. Buber (1939) suggested the importance of dialogue lies in the need to know students and their communities and to educate people through relationships that foster a shared community.

Relative to deficit thinking, dialogue allows us to deconstruct the assumptions made about students who are marginalized and reconstruct them based on the relationships fostered through dialogue. Shields and Edwards (2005) posited that dialogue permits us to understand something or someone who is in some way different than ourselves, who has a different perspective, alternative lens, or varied history (p. 15).

Unfortunately, traditional education structures have not created space for students who are marginalized to engage in dialogue with the dominant culture. The lived experiences of the marginalized have been overlooked. Jones (1999) asserted dialogue has been excluded from traditional measures at school reform:

So it turns out that the real exclusion here is not that of the subordinate at all. It is the dominant group's exclusion from their ability to hear the voice of the marginalized. This silence in the ears of the powerful is misrecognized as the silence of the subordinate and it reproduces their exclusion. (p. 3)

Dialogue is a practice that has not been afforded to marginalized groups and has thus resulted in generations of marginalizing practices. It became evident in both cases that dialogue that is consistent and purposeful is deliberate dialogue. Deliberate dialogue is the essence of a culture that is committed to the elimination of deficit thinking.

Through a Critical Lens

Through a critical lens, deliberate dialogue was used to address the practices that marginalized students of culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, and those from families of low-socio-economic status. In this case, Leigh donned a critical lens to help stakeholders recognize how their actions and mindset did not validate the lived experiences of students who are marginalized. The experiences of students who are marginalized were often deemed deficient; deliberate dialogue built an understanding of the lived experiences of these students, fostered an appreciation for their uniqueness, and created a vision of how to change the dominant school context to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Through a Reflective Lens

Through a reflective lens, deliberate dialogue was used to address the marginalizing of students of culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, and those from families of low-socio-economic status. In this case, Sam donned a reflective lens to help stakeholders recognize how their actions and mindset did not create space for students who did not fit the traditional student mold. Their uniqueness was deemed a deficit and helping stakeholders walk in their shoes through deliberate dialogue created empathy for students who are marginalized. The new understanding created space in the dominant school context as the differences are coming to be recognized as strengths.

Transformative Leadership to Foster Equity

I worked on the premise that if a principal was working to eliminate deficit thinking, then he or she was working to change the beliefs and actions of teachers to provide equity to all students. Transformative leadership inextricably links education and educational leadership with

the wider social context within which it is embedded (Kose & Shields, 2009). Starratt (1991) posited a transformative leader strives for an ethical organization by focusing on three pillars: critique, justice, and caring. These pillars are consistent with Weiner's (2003) definition of transformative leadership as an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy and dialogue. In both cases, Sam and Leigh demonstrated characteristics of a transformative leader. They intently and deliberately identified and worked to eliminate practices that explicitly perpetuated an inequitable learning environment.

Leigh began her tenure as principal by providing an equitable learning experience to students that had been denied access to enriching courses. She was challenged by a cultural mindset that posited the content of some courses was too difficult for all students. She recognized the social impact of that erroneous assumption prevented many of her students from gaining the benefits of certain programs. In order to provide a more equitable learning environment for every student, Leigh challenged such marginalizing practices. In the end, her vision to offer the foreign language curriculum to every student was met, but she endured some hardships. As Leigh shared, she realized she put herself at odds with some staff members, but she recognized it is her role as the leader of the building to provide an equitable learning environment for every student. Taking the risk for her students is demonstrative of a morally courageous leader (Shields, 2010).

Sam faced similar hardships with his staff when he pushed to eliminate the lowest level classes and open the door for more students to take AP courses. Inspired by his own experience, Sam recognized the need to provide students with a more challenging education despite their behavior and academic history which he believed is often attributed to cultural and social differences between the student and his or her teacher. In the end, Sam succeeded in eliminating

the basic track to provide a more equitable education for every student, but like Leigh, he received scars from the event. He continues to struggle with staff members who continue to resist the notion that every student deserves the same privileges.

The result of their leadership was that every student, despite cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic indicators, was afforded an equitable education complete with the same access and privileges of students from non-marginalized groups. This approach is supported by Shields and Furman (2005) premise that transformative leadership correlates social justice and democratic community with concepts of student learning.

Recommendations

This study sought to identify and explore the strategies utilized to eliminate deficit thinking. In both cases, the dominant emerging theme revolved around deliberate dialogue regarding the education of students who are marginalized. Each case participant intently raised questions and participated in conversations regarding the often pathologized backgrounds and experiences of students who are marginalized. In each case, the moral courage of the principal was foundational in meeting his or her vision of validating the lived experiences and creating space for all students.

This study has found that there are specific practices school leaders can employ to help eliminate deficit thinking. Based on these findings, several recommendations are made to school leaders to provide students who are marginalized with the access and opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Deliberate Dialogue

When access and equity are denied to every student, dialogue can provide one context for challenging and eliminating the practices that perpetuate deficit thinking. Dialogue is the most critical aspect of transforming a deficit thinking culture (Shields & Edwards, 2005), and it is a critical characteristic of a transformative leader (Weiner, 2003). Dialogue is the premise of an inclusive community (Shields, et al., 2004; Buber, 1939). As the research indicated, stakeholders at both sites came to a more informed understanding of their marginalizing practices when the school leader deliberately engaged in dialogue regarding marginalizing practices. As a result, he or she was able to start the process of replacing marginalizing practices with opportunities that invite access and equity to more students.

Professional Development as Dialogue

Professional development is critical in efforts to eliminate deficit thinking. Professional development in the form of dialogue is one aspect of a democratic education (Moller, 2006). This research found that good professional development, especially as it pertains to addressing deficit thinking, is to emphasize dialogue regarding marginalizing practices, and the dialogue must be consistent and deliberate. According to these findings, professional development has to afford stakeholders an opportunity to engage one another in reflection and critique of the thoughts and practices that marginalize students. This approach creates opportunities for the difficult conversations that need to occur to help curb pathologizing practices and address deficit thinking. Once a professional development structure embedded in dialogue is created, the conversations that help breakdown assumptions and prejudices can take place.

Creating a Culture of Tolerance through Reflection

School personnel, especially those that interact with students on a daily basis, significantly impact student achievement (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). It becomes critical that staff engage in reflective practices that foster a culture of tolerance and are conducive to student achievement. The school leader's responsibility is to educate staff on the importance of critical reflection in preparation for a paradigm shift in which deficit thinking is no longer tolerated (Shields, 2009). Classroom walkthroughs and observations may provide a platform for holding critical conversations inclusive of reflection.

The reflective conversations should specifically address any observed practices that marginalize students. Inviting teachers to adopt a reflective lens allows them to voice concerns and engage in disagreements in a more informed manner. Through the reflective process, they come to understand how their practices may invite deficit thinking. For many staff members, the notion of eliminating deficit thinking challenges the mindset of an entrenched culture, and in some cases, leads them to admit that what they have been doing as educators has been misguided and marginalizing (Muhammad, 2009). The process of eliminating deficit thinking will take time, but it should proceed accordingly, and reflection is critical in creating that culture.

Revisit Tracking

In both cases, the most identifiable perpetrator of deficit thinking is academic tracking (Valencia, 1997b; Weiner, 2006). As discussed in this research, there were lowered expectations about the abilities of students in basic, essential, and non-college bound tracks. Consequently, students in lower or basic tracks received limited exposure to culturally enriching opportunities, and the make-up of students in those tracks often reflected social and cultural differences (Farkas, 2003; Lipman, 1998; Oakes, 1995). The lack of diversity that results from tracking

practices prohibits the exposure of students to conversations with that of their peers from different social and cultural backgrounds (Schofield, 2010). In that scenario, every student falls short of a meaningful and democratic education. Eliminating tracking practices affords students an education filled with meaningful conversations that lend themselves to building empathy and understanding of other's social and cultural backgrounds.

Create Access

In addition to providing access to a more rigorous educational experience for students who are marginalized, schools need to engage all students in extra-curricular activities that provide a platform for all students to voice their lived experiences. Access to such experiences can also be achieved through the elimination of tracking, or an advisory program where students select topics to discuss with peers and teachers in a diversified setting as found at Jackson Middle School, or as in Brook Hills High School, through the creation of gender and culture specific groups so more students can engage in leadership roles with the intention of bringing together all the student organizations in meaningful conversations.

Create Space

Creating space for parents who are traditionally turned away from schools is also vital to the process of eliminating deficit thinking. There are many reasons parents are turned away from schools. According to the findings in this study, principals believe that parents stay away because of cultural and linguistic differences that create feelings of inferiority in the school setting. Additionally, the findings indicate that real world factors such as work schedules and the lack of babysitting do not afford them the opportunity to partake in school activities. At Jackson Middle School, creating space for parents involved making home visits, providing translators at school functions, and alternating school function times to accommodate various work schedules.

Additionally, providing childcare services and meals can also assist in the efforts to bring parents of marginalized backgrounds into the buildings. These platforms provide space for the voices of every stakeholder to become a part of the decision-making process.

For Further Study

I have learned much about deficit thinking and how it impacts the education of students who are marginalized. I have a much better understanding of how practices that stem from deficit thinking contribute to academic gaps in learning which ultimately impact the achievement gap. School leaders can help deconstruct those practices by creating space for students and parents of marginalized groups. Understanding how deficit thinking practices curb opportunities and recognizing the power of deliberate dialogue creates a platform for the deconstruction of power structures and the creation of a more democratic school structure. Once in place, educators can start to imagine an achievement gap that no longer exists along lines of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences.

In this sense, I have contributed to the field of research by addressing the impact of deficit thinking on students who are marginalized in secondary schools. Specifically, deliberate dialogue needs to be a part of the conversation. I have found that through deliberate dialogue, educators validate the lived experiences of students and families who do not fit the traditional schooling mode. Deliberate dialogue also creates space for the voices of the marginalized in the everyday school context. These are important themes to consider in the conversations regarding the academic achievement of students who are marginalized.

Conclusion

The most important finding in this study is the need to create opportunities for deliberate dialogue about the intentional or unintentional assumptions that educators bring to their daily interactions with students. When the assumptions are positive, the results are rather indicative of a quality and equitable education. Unfortunately, when the assumptions are limiting, it creates an educational experience in which the student's true potential is never really unveiled. The lowered expectations and assumed incompetence are a result of deficit thinking.

This study found that deliberate dialogue regarding the marginalization of students will foster greater possibilities for the academic achievement of students who are marginalized, but more importantly, it will provide opportunities to positively impact their quality of life. There are immediate strategies in which school leaders and educators can use that have the potential to positively impact the achievement of marginalized groups, and because it is the right thing to do as a transformative leader who is guided by moral courage.

Furthermore, it was the intent of this study to address educators' responses to the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences of students that lend to deficit thinking practices. This study did not intend to prove that we can fully close the learning gap between students who are marginalized and those in the dominant context. This study sought to research whether we can create more inclusive and less marginalizing schools by acknowledging our own prejudices and assumptions.

It is my hope that educators and educational leaders use these findings to start asking questions of themselves and one another about the prejudices and assumptions that we bring to the table. Are there assumptions we have been making about the potential of our students? Are we engaging in practices that limit what our students are capable of doing? Are we creating

space for marginalized groups to be a part of the decision-making process or are we continuing to blame the students and families for their misfortunes. Most importantly, it is my hope that we are going to engage in deliberate conversations now and start to address the inequities in education so that we are not reading another research study in twenty years about the existing stereotypes and assumptions we make that marginalize students.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Principals

“Addressing the Marginalizing Practices:

The Secondary Principal’s Role in Eliminating Deficit Thinking”

1. Can you tell me about your current school, including teacher and student demographics and your school’s mission and vision statement?
2. What does a “typical” day look like for you at school?
3. How would you describe your leadership style?
4. How would you define deficit thinking?
5. How do you identify elements of deficit thinking in your school?
6. What strategies do you employ to address deficit thinking with your staff?
7. How often do you employ these strategies?
8. What role do teachers play in promoting/perpetuating deficit thinking?
9. What role have teachers played in helping to eliminate deficit thinking?
10. How do you observe and/or measure whether these strategies are being implemented by your staff?
11. What challenges do you face when addressing deficit thinking?
12. How are students included in the strategies?
13. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Appendix B

Teacher Survey

May 23, 2011

Dear Participant:

Welcome to a brief survey regarding the educational experience of marginalized students. For the purpose of this survey, the term “marginalized” refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. Your participation will be confidential since your responses will be sent directly to the researcher. All information that is obtained during this research project will be kept secure and will be accessible only to project personnel. It will also be coded to remove all identifying information.

We anticipate no risk by participating in this research other than what might be experienced in normal life. The results of this study may be used for a dissertation, a scholarly report, a journal article, and a conference presentation. In any publication or public presentation, pseudonyms will be used. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact us.

If you DO want to participate, please print a copy of this letter for your records and select “I agree to complete this survey” at the bottom of this page.

If you do NOT want to participate in the project, please close this window.

☐ I agree to complete this survey.

1. Think of a child who is not succeeding in your class. Please list the reasons for this lack of success.
2. To what extent do you feel:

	Very Much		Very Little
You address the learning needs of every student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your colleagues address the learning needs of every student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your principal addresses the learning needs of every student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. To what extent do you feel:

	Very Much				Very Little
The current educational structure is the same structure in which I attended and succeeded during my K-12 school experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Every student has the opportunity to succeed in the current educational structure despite any differences in language, culture, and socio-economic status.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The current educational structure needs to reinvent itself by incorporating the latest research on learning to address the shift in student demographics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

What, if any, research, dialogue, or training have you been exposed to regarding the shift in demographics and student learning?

4. To what extent do you feel you receive the professional development/training needed to:

	Very Much				Very Little
Address the learning, social, and emotional needs of every student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Briefly explain the type of professional development/training you receive regarding the learning, social, and emotional needs of every student?

5. In the following question, “marginalized” refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

To what extent do you think your principal:

	Very Much				Very Little
Fosters positive relationships with students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fosters positive relationships with parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fosters positive relationships with staff.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Engages stakeholders in conversations regarding marginalized students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Empowers stakeholders to take leadership roles in the learning of all students, especially the marginalized.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Keeps the learning of every student as the focus of his or her mission.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In general, students of low socio-economic status have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than students of middle and upper socio-economic status.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In our building, students of low socio-economic status have the same academic opportunities as students of middle and upper socio-economic status.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for my students of low socio-economic status as I do for all my students.

☐
☐
☐
☐

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of low socio-economic status.

7. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

In general, students of linguistically different backgrounds have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than students from a predominately English speaking background.

☐
☐
☐
☐

In our building, students of linguistically different backgrounds have the same academic opportunities as students from a predominately English speaking background.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for students of linguistically different backgrounds as I do for all my students.

☐
☐
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☐

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of linguistically different backgrounds.

8. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In general, students of culturally different backgrounds have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than their Caucasian peers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In our building, students of culturally different backgrounds have the same academic opportunities as their Caucasian peers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for students of culturally different backgrounds as I do for all my students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of culturally different backgrounds.

9. In the following question, “marginalized” refers to students of low socio-economic status, and/or students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It is important to identify with the challenges marginalized students bring to their educational experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is important to identify with the challenges marginalized students bring to their educational experience, but it is not my responsibility to address them as an aspect of my instruction.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I recognize that some of the norms associated with marginalized groups impact their educational experience.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I recognize that some of the norms associated with marginalized groups impact their educational experience, but it is not my responsibility to address them as an aspect of my instruction.

☐
☐
☐
☐

10. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

All students are provided with the same opportunities to learn in our building.

☐
☐
☐
☐

AP, honors, and gifted programs of study should be reserved for only the top, academically performing students.

☐
☐
☐
☐

AP, honors, and gifted programs should be opened to any student.

☐
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☐

I believe every student should be afforded access to the most rigorous courses.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I believe only high achieving students should be afforded access to the most rigorous courses.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I believe tracking/ability grouping is essential to the success of every student.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I believe tracking into lower level classes limits the opportunities for students.

☐
☐
☐
☐

Behavior is associated with learning, and it should be a criterion in the placement decision.

☐
☐
☐
☐

11. How long have you worked in the building?

- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 4-6 years
- ☐ 7-10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years

12. Have you noticed a change in the way you address the learning needs of every student, especially the marginalized, in the past five years? Please explain.